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GIRALDI.

Giraldi;

OR,

THE CURSE OF LOVE.

BY

ROSS GEORGE DERING.

"I had once been shown a blue star, and wished to renew my acquaintance with it. I had to learn that there were no really blue stars, and the colour had been due to an imperfectly achromatic lens—a type perhaps of some other celestial truths of which we fancy ourselves perfectly certain."—FROUDE.

"Nothing strikes me so forcibly with a sense of the ridiculous as Love. A man in love, I do think, cuts the sorryest figure in the world. . . . The love of a woman is a cloying treacle to the wings of independence."—KEATS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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GIRALDI;

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CHAPTER XII.

THE DUCHESS AND HER GIRLS.

"Now, girls, get out your needlework, and let's have a good long talk. I've heaps to ask you, and we've the whole afternoon before us. Come, Edith, dair, let's hear this wonderful piece of news of yours. What's it all about?"

The speaker was the Duchess of Moneysworth, who, surrounded by three or four of her young favourites—"her girls," as she always called them—was sitting by the open window of her boudoir on the afternoon of the day appointed for the Duke of Grandchester's entertainment.

"I'm so glad you haven't heard it, Duchess," said Edith, laughing, "for now I shall have the fun of telling you myself. Who do you think is going to be married?"

"Married?" repeated the Duchess, eagerly; "I'm sure I don't know, middair. Why, who can it be, I wonder?"

"There are two of them, I believe," said Beatrice Heath, carelessly, as she bit off the end of her cotton.

"Two?" cried the Duchess.

"Don't be such a goose, Beatrice," said Edith. "Of course I didn't mean that he was going to get married all by himself. I want the Duchess to guess."

"Oh! So it's a he, is it?" remarked her Grace, sagely. "Well, now, let me think.—Mr. Leech?"

"Mr. Leech, indeed!" exclaimed Edith, in playful indignation. "No, Duchess; you're a long way off the mark. Somebody much nicer than Mr. Leech."

"You don't mean your brother?" queried the Duchess, with sudden interest. "Pore Eric; I should like to see him comfortably settled. It isn't he, is it, middair?"

"No, indeed," said Edith. "I only wish it were."

"Well then, dair, I don't know," said the Duchess. "Why, who else is there? Not little Giraldi?"

"Worse and worse!" laughed Edith and Beatrice together. "Why, he's only a baby," added Beatrice.

"Well, then, tell me, middair," said the Duchess. "I can't guess for the life of me. Who is it?"

"Mr. Tresham," replied Edith.

"Mr. Tresham!!!" shouted her Grace, letting her work fall in her astonishment. "Well, to be sure! What an old ninny I must be never to have thought of him! The

rascal, now, never to have come and told me himself. And who's the lady, middair? Anybody I know?"

"Ah! that your Grace will never guess," said Edith, more seriously. "It took us all utterly by surprise."

"I believe it's you yourself, you little hypocrite!" exclaimed the Duchess.

"Indeed it isn't!" protested Edith, blushing hotly. "It's——"

"Stop! stop!" cried her Grace once more. "I'm going the round of you all. Beatrice, dair, are you the fortunate person?"

"Oh dear, no," replied Miss Heath, with equanimity. "I was never made love to in my life."

"Now, Margaret Ashe, it's your turn," said the Duchess, turning to that useful member of society. "Are you the future Mrs. Tresham?"

"Really, Duchess!" cried Miss Ashe, faintly, getting very red. "I'm sure *I've* never given the young man any encouragement. Of course I've always treated 'im with proper politeness; but as to letting 'im 'ave any reason to suppose—why, Duchess, what *could* make you think of such a thing?"

An ill-concealed smirk, however, which, in spite of all her efforts, made itself apparent round the corners of Miss Ashe's mouth, betrayed the real pleasure experienced by that lady

at the Duchess's pretended suspicions. The girls laughed outright, while the Duchess gave one of her humorous grunts, and was just proceeding to attack the next in order when Edith interposed—

"Dear Duchess, you're entirely on the wrong tack. It's nobody present, believe me. I expect you'll have to give it up."

"Very well, then, dair, I do," said her Grace, resignedly. "Tell me who the girl is, for I can't think of anybody else."

"What would you say to Naomi Insight?" answered Edith, quietly.

The Duchess suddenly became quite still. All her gaiety seemed to forsake her in a moment. "Naomi Insight!" she echoed at last. "You don't mean to tell me he's going to marry Naomi Insight?"

"He's engaged to her, at any rate," responded Beatrice, briefly. "I believe it's an affair of some weeks already."

"Well, well, well!" ejaculated the Duchess, slowly, after another pause. "No, dairs; I never *should* have guessed it. There you were quite right. Of all people in this world! What can he see in her? I don't understand it. It's beyond me altogether. And, pray, where has he ever met her?"

"He met her here first," said Beatrice; "and seeing that he goes to Mr. Insight's every other day, or nearly so,

he must have had good opportunities of improving his acquaintance. I've no doubt she's a very fascinating girl. At all events, she seems to have fascinated him."

"Well, well, well!" exclaimed her Grace, once more. "Of course it's no business of mine; but I'm sorry for it. Foolish young man! Well, they're all alike, I suppose. You can never count upon what a man will do in the way of marrying, middairs. The best and cleverest of them make fools of themselves when it comes to that."

Then the Duke came in, and the Duchess fired off the news at him as though she wanted to knock him down. The Duke stared, and began to pace slowly to and fro—leopardising, his wife called it, for she said it reminded her of a wild animal in a cage—with his mouth pursed up, his hands in his breeches' pockets, and his head thrust forward in contemplation. "Well, and why shouldn't they marry if they want to?" he said at last.

"There, now, if that isn't just like the Duke," said the old lady. "You never can astonish him. But I say, Edith, middair, what do you think your ma 'll say to it?"

"I don't suppose she'll care," replied Miss Charteris. "She's given up all hopes of Mr. Tresham ever since he preached that sermon about Elijah. I've not heard her speak about him for a long time; and of course he never comes near us now."

"Why, what did he say about Elijah?" asked the Duke, wheeling suddenly round, and fixing his clear grey eyes on Edith

"Lor, my old man, how you made me jump," exclaimed the Duchess, with a start. "I wish you'd always tell me when you're going to speak."

"What did he say about Elijah that your mother didn't like?" repeated the Duke, without paying the slightest attention to his wife's remonstrances.

"He said that it was very wicked of him to kill all those priests," replied Edith, "and that we're just as bad as he was when we rail at people who differ from us on religious subjects."

"Oh," said the Duke, quietly. "So that was it. And your mother didn't agree with him. H'm! Well, I call that rather sensible for a parson, now. I don't know that I should be disposed to dispute that argument at all."

"But didn't your ma have some trouble with the deacons about it?" asked the Duchess. "I heard they were very angry, and said she ought to have made sure he was sound in doctrine before she gave him the living."

"Yes, there has been a good deal of trouble, I believe," said Edith, "and it has preyed upon her mind dreadfully. She hasn't been herself since."

"Tell me all about it, middair," said the Duchess, as she threaded her needle afresh.

"I really don't know any details," replied Edith. "But it seems that they turned round upon Mr. Leech, because he told them it was no business of theirs; and one thing led to another, so that what was at first only a piece of foolish interference on their part grew into a rather hot dispute. Eventually, however, Mr. Leech managed to quiet them, and now I believe he's succeeded in fixing their animosity upon Mr. Tresham; a clever stroke on his part, because you know so many people have left Mr. Leech's for the district church, and also because it diverted their resentment from mamma."

"So he runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds," remarked the Duke, who had been listening with some amusement. "Clever man, that."

"He is clever, beyond question," returned Edith. "He has managed to keep in with the deacons and to protect mamma from their impertinence at the same time. But she feels very resentful about it, and has positively refused to contribute anything to the annual tea-meeting, which is to come off next week."

"Can't think why your ma wants to mix herself up with such people," sniffed the Duchess. "Tea-meet'ns, indeed! However, of course she must do it if she likes, pore thing; and after all, I'd sooner she did it than I."

"That's very good of you," remarked the Duke.

"Why, my gracious me, if there isn't Mr. Simpson!" exclaimed the Duchess, as a large, lazy-looking, white cat came slowly into the room. "Where have you been, you old rascal—eh?" continued her Grace, shaking her treble chin threateningly at the unconscious animal. "Why haven't you come to see your aunt, you ungrateful old thing?"

"Who? Where? What's Mr. Simpson?" exclaimed the girls, in astonishment.

"It's my cat," replied the Duchess, impressively. "It was given me by a very respectable man, middairs, who used to come and take away our dust and rubbish, when we lived in Walton Terrace. He died afterwards, pore fellow, just before we left; I saw him in his corf'n. And then he gave me this cat as a sort of keepsake; so I thought I couldn't do better than name it after him."

"How very pathetic!" remarked Beatrice.

"Yes, dair," said her Grace. "But lor! talking of dust-men, I had such a bit of fun out of a dust-bin once. We were staying in apartments, you know—it's many years ago now—and—lor! if there isn't Mr. Simpson eat'n' flies again! Don't let him do it, middair"—to the Duke; "I'm always telling him not to, it's that that makes him so thin." The Duke, thus adjured, mechanically flourished a large yellow silk handkerchief in the cat's face, and then sat down in his favourite sideways attitude upon a chair and appeared to go

to sleep. "Well, you know, middairs, we were in apartments, and the Duke—he was only Mr. Preston then—left six cigars one morning on his dressing-table. After breakfast, he thought he'd like a smoke; but when he went into his room to get a cigar, he found there were only three. Well, we rang for the servant, and asked her where they were. 'Sure, m'm,' says the hussy, '*I've* never took any of the gentleman's cigars, which I wouldn't touch 'em, not being a smoker myself.' 'No, Susan,' I said, 'I never supposed you were; but you may know somebody who is, perhaps'—for I knew the wretch had got a young man. Well, down she flounced in a great rage, and in half an hour in came my lady with the three cigars she had stolen in her hand. 'Pray, m'm, do you think these is them?' she said. 'Well,' I answered, 'I should say it was not unlikely; but where did you find them, pray?' 'Quite accidental, m'm, in the dust-bin,' said the woman, as bold as brass; 'but however they got there I'm sure I don't know.' 'Dear me, Susan,' said I, 'what a very valuable dust-bin that must be, to be sure! But never mind; that'll do now.' Soon after this we went away, and Mrs. Susan came smirking up in the hopes of half-a-sovereign. 'Lor, Susan,' I said, 'I wouldn't think of offering *you* anything; why, you've got a mine of gold just at the back of your own kitchen.' 'What d'ye mean, m'm?' said the woman, sharply. 'Do you

intend to go away without leaving so much as half-a-crown behind you?' 'Yes, my good girl, I do,' I said; 'but if you want one, you know, you'd better go and see if you can't find one in the dust-bin.' Lor, dairs, you should have seen the hussy's face!"

"What immense fun!" said Edith, laughing. "I shouldn't have dared for all the world. But then of course I'm not you."

"No, middair, you're not," said the Duchess, equably. "Oh, my goodness me, how very warm it is to-day, to be sure! I say, middair old king!"

"Well," replied the Duke, mechanically.

"Has that canary got any water in its cage?"

"I'm sure I don't know," replied the Duke, without opening his eyes.

"There, now! If that isn't just like the Duke," chuckled her Grace, in high glee. "Never mind; I'll see to it myself directly. Lor, the Duke's *such* an old rascal, you can't think. You don't half know his ways yet. I say, middair!"

"What do you want?" said the Duke in rather a loud voice, suddenly opening his eyes and staring fixedly at his wife.

"Lor, you pore old dair, if you behave like that again I'll smack you!" shouted the Duchess. Beatrice and Edith went off into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. The Duke

rose stiffly to his legs, and began to pace the room in a vague and aimless manner, apparently quite unmoved by the alarming menace of his wife. Miss Ashe pursed up her mouth in a sort of deprecating smile, as though she expected the Duchess's threat to be put into instant execution, and was trying to prepare herself for the worst. Just then a servant entered bearing a card, which he presented to the Duchess.

"Well, I declare now," exclaimed the good lady, as she read the name. "Why, it's little Giraldi. Ask him in, by all means. I haven't seen the boy I don't know when. Do you know, middair," continued her Grace, when the servant had retired, "I can't help liking that pore little pope, somehow. Nice boy, I think, if he were more like other people."

"What poor little pope?" demanded the Duke, amazed.

"Why, that boy Giraldi," returned her Grace. "It seems so queer for him to be living there with a lot of priests and no one to look after him. Must be very bad for him, I should think."

"I fancy he's happy enough," said Beatrice Heath. "He seems full of spirits, and solitude evidently agrees with him. I don't see that he's much to be pitied."

These remarks were interrupted by the entrance of Giraldi himself. He was carefully dressed in a spruce

little tunic of black velvet, buttoned straight down the front, and a low collar, which gave him a very youthful and innocent expression. He advanced smiling, with a rapid step, and paid his respects to the Duchess with much grace; then turned to the Duke, who put out a couple of fingers and said, "Well, Sir, well!" in a vague and general manner, which would have been slightly embarrassing to the person addressed but for the kindly expression which accompanied the words; and finally exchanged a friendly greeting with the girls. "This is a pleasure I never expected," said the lad with a light laugh, as he took his seat in the circle next to Edith Charteris.

"We haven't seen you for ever so long," said Edith, as she made room for him. "You never come up to our place now."

"What have you been doing with yourself, my boy?" asked the Duchess.

"Oh, nothing more than usual," replied Giraldi. "I study and sketch and go about. I don't lead a very eventful life, you know, Duchess, but I'm always occupied."

"You're great friends with Mr. Tresham, I believe," remarked her Grace. "Have you seen much of him lately?"

"No, I haven't," said Giraldi. "I like Mr. Tresham very much; oh, he's a dear fellow! But I suppose he has his work to do, and we live rather far apart. He has been

to see me once or twice, you know. He met Father Aloysius. Father Aloysius liked him very much. He took him into the chapel——"

"Well?" queried the Duchess, as Giraldi paused rather abruptly.

"Nothing," said Giraldi, a slight flush passing over his face. "I was only thinking how very hot it was that day. Hotter than it is now. How beautiful your lawn looks this afternoon, with the sunlight on the river as it glides past!"

"Yes, it was mown this morning," said the Duchess. "Can't bear long grass; it looks so dreadfully untidy. But about Mr. Tresham. Have you heard the news?"

"No," replied Giraldi. "What, about Tresham?"

"Yes, about your friend Tresham," returned her Grace. "He's going to be married!"

"Indeed!" exclaimed the boy, a bright expression of pleasure lighting up his face. "Oh, I'm so glad," he continued, casting a sly glance at the girls, who were proceeding quietly with their embroidery. "I certainly had no idea of that. But who——"

"Oh, it's no use your looking round here," tittered Miss Ashe, her spectacles gleaming like a pair of cat's eyes in the dark. "None of us are the favoured one. He's gone farther, and—I mean he's——"

"And fared worse, I suppose you were going to say,"

shouted the Duchess, with one of her rolling laughs. "Margaret Ashe, you envious old thing, you! I do believe you're dying because you can't have him yourself!"

Giraldi burst into a peal of laughter. Beatrice looked ever so little uneasy, but laughed too, with a slight flush mounting to her brow. Poor Miss Ashe collapsed hopelessly, as usual, and sat with a ghastly smile of forced amusement on her hot face, evidently wishing herself several fathoms deep under the ground.

"Well, but I haven't heard who it is yet," resumed Giraldi, looking merrily round the circle. "It must be somebody I don't know. There's no one else in Heathercombe that I can think of."

"Well, my boy, I think it *is* somebody you don't know," replied the Duchess. "It's a Miss Insight, the daughter of a very good old friend of mine. I dare say you never met Mr. Insight; but he's a very fine man, and Mr. Tresham is going to marry his daughter Naomi."

"Miss Insight," repeated Giraldi, rather vaguely. "Oh yes, I have heard of her. I think I've seen her once or twice. She's very dark, isn't she?"

"Yes, I think she is," replied her Grace, indifferently. "Anyhow they're engaged, and I believe he's very much in love with her."

"And is she very much in love with him?" asked

Giraldi, with a merry smile, as he rested one foot upon his knee.

"Lor, my boy, how can I tell?" said the Duchess. "I hope she is; but of course there's no knowing—girls are so queer now-a-days. Why, I remember a girl once, many years ago, who was over head in ears in love with a man, and who jilted him three weeks before the wedding because she thought she had a chance of marrying a battered old rake of sixty-five with a handle to his name. Lor, I hate women!" cried her Grace, energetically. "Nasty, mean hussies, nearly the whole pack of 'em. Oh, I don't mean any of you, middairs"—as Miss Ashe drew herself up in deprecating amazement, and the girls began a laughing protest—"so you needn't stand upon *your* dignity, Margaret Ashe. Why, I'd wish to be a man myself, if it wasn't for my old Duke. What'd he have done without me all these years, I wonder! Eh, middair old king?"

"What do you want now?" asked his Grace, absently, hearing himself thus appealed to.

"There, never mind," said the Duchess, her attention being attracted by a passing boat on the river. "Beatrice, middair, just touch that bell, will you, and we'll have some tea. I can't do without my tea of an afternoon."

The bell was touched, and the tea dispensed by the old lady herself, who never suffered anybody else to preside at

the urn in her own house. By this time it was considerably past five, and Giraldi offered his escort to the young ladies if they were thinking of returning to the town. It had been arranged, however, that they should stay to dinner at The Hyacinths, and go to Castle Sudds in the evening under the chaperonage of the Duchess. Giraldi therefore took leave of his host and hostess and tripped briskly off alone. He chose a short cut across the meadows, where the path ran along the side of the river, falling into a leisurely stroll as he passed under the shady trees and humming softly to himself. Suddenly a stalwart form appeared through a gap in the hedge, and Giraldi, raising his eyes in his usual absent manner, found himself face to face with Eric Charteris, who, fishing-rod in hand, was going to spend an hour in trying to hook a trout. Now Eric, as we have already hinted, was not particularly fond of little Giraldi.

"Well, Giraldi, where are you off to now?" he cried, in his usual bluff way, as he came up to him.

"I've just come from The Hyacinths," said the lad, smiling. "Are you going to fish?"

"I didn't ask you where you'd come from, I asked you where you were off to," replied young Charteris. "However, you look very blooming, I must say. Going to old Grandchester's to-night?"

"I believe so," said Giraldi.

"Well, and what's the news up at The Hyacinths?" continued Eric.

"Haven't you heard?" replied the other. "You must know it, surely. Everybody knows it by this time, I should think."

"What are you talking of?" asked Eric.

"Why, about Tresham, of course," said Giraldi. "Do you mean to say he has never told you?"

"Told me what?" said Eric, impatiently. "How you do beat about the bush! Can't you say straight out what you mean?"

"Oh dear, don't get angry, now," laughed the lad. "I thought you'd have been the first to hear it. Why, he's going to be married. He's engaged to——"

"The devil!" ejaculated Eric, with his mouth and eyes wide open.

"I believe you're about right there," rejoined little Giraldi, with rather a sharp laugh, "for he's going to marry your Miss Insight."

Now Eric, as our readers are well aware, was not in love with Naomi. He had flirted with her, walked about with her, and got her talked of by her father's congregation. She flattered him and amused him, and that was all. Her apparent preference for him tickled his innocent vanity,

which vented itself in much uproarious brag, that meant nothing, and was intended to mean nothing. At the same time, the news came upon him with very disagreeable force. It seemed to him that both Naomi and Tresham had acted treacherously. He had been so jolly, as he expressed it, in Naomi's society, and so utterly unconscious of any warmth of feeling towards her on the part of Tresham—the very last man in the world he would have suspected of such a thing—that he felt shocked and wounded. The hot blood mounted to his brow. He came to a sudden standstill; then ejaculating abruptly, "Damned fool!" he turned upon his heel and left Giraldi to interpret the exclamation as best he might.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GLIMPSE OF OLYMPUS.

It was quite true. The Duke of Grandchester, after years of non-residence in Heathercombe, was actually going to give a ball; and the best of it was that all the world was to be there. The grandees were to be in a minority, and the *bourgeoisie* the heroes of the hour. Lord Pulvilio characterised the affair as a sort of harvest-home, and prepared himself to do the honours in much the same spirit as if organising a servants' ball, in which the hostess would dance with her own butler, and the heir with the prettiest of the kitchen wenches. But as the thing had got to be done, it should at any rate be done well. The summer was in its fullest glory, and all that flowers of the rarest loveliness and most delicate perfumes could do to irradiate the rooms was certainly not wanting. Never, for at least five-and-twenty years, had the old castle looked so brilliant. The avenues were garlanded with Japanese lanterns of silken gauze, in all conceivable designs. Banks of flowering shrubs gleamed from every recess in the spacious rooms, while tiny fountains

spurted their silvery spray over fancy rockwork draped with the loveliest ferns. It was altogether a very splendid scene, and the whole business bade fair to be a grand success. The Duke of Grandchester, with bald and shining pate, fresh, apparently, from a bath of fragrant ointment, and gleaming with smiles and snowy shirt-front, paced sleekly up and down the floor, passing his smooth hands softly one over the other, and addressing a bland word ever and anon to Lord Pulvilio, who looked the picture of vacant apathy. Then down came swimming the Lady Gwendolen Honourbright to receive her father's guests. Lady Gwendolen was rather thin as to figure, and just a trifle acid as to expression. Her somewhat pointed nose was scarcely of that ivory whiteness that had been wont to distinguish it ten years or so before; for her ladyship was not a day under thirty, and was besides often sadly troubled with catarrh. A slight indistinctness, too, in her pronunciation of nasals added to the impression that she suffered from a perpetual cold. Had she not been a Duke's daughter, and of birth and breeding still more undeniable than that of Lady Gloatover, she might without impropriety have been set down as a somewhat faded, peevish-looking young woman; but being what she was, it would have been a breach of propriety to regard her otherwise than as a lady of title and delicate nerves, whose ailments derived all the grace and

interest that could be imparted to them by her exalted station.

At a quarter past nine the first carriage-wheels were heard, and the rooms began to fill rapidly. Among the first to arrive was Admiral the Earl of Marlinspyke, R.N., a bluff, roaring old person, full of strange oaths, with his son, Viscount Binnacle, in tow. Lady Gloatover came rustling downstairs, looking as pleasant as she could, poor old woman, and deserving no small praise for her endeavours. Smiling Lady Turquoise looked pleasant, for the simple reason that she did not know how to look otherwise, and did her part in the entertaining with a winning grace that, being natural to her, did not entitle her to any credit. She moved hither and thither among the guests as they came in, leaving a bright impression behind her of carmine lips, and silvery laughs, and nodding azure plumes; while old Lady Gloatover, in a hideous shot-silk gown, and a single eyeglass in constant play, sat glowering at the *bourgeois* crowd around her—having soon relapsed into her normal state—in safe proximity to the growling Earl. Our genial friends the Duke and Duchess of Moneysworth arrived shortly before ten, accompanied by Edith, Beatrice, Miss Ashe, and one or two more; and to this party did his Grace of Grandchester vouchsafe his most lubricated smiles and polished welcome.

"No gas, I see, Duke," said the mischievous old lady,

chuckling, as she crossed the room on the arm of her courtly host. She had not forgotten the Duke's remark at her garden-party about the disastrous effect of gas upon his daughter's jewels.

"May heaven forbid!" exclaimed his Grace, with as much piety in his tone as was compatible with correct breeding. "Wax—wax; all the purest wax. Ah! Duchess, you have your revenge. My poor glimmer fades into dimness beside the brilliant galaxy your Grace has honoured me by bringing with you this evening."

"The idea of the varnished old creature comparing my girls to his horrid candles!" grunted the Duchess that night, as she recounted the conversation to her old king in the privacy of their chamber. But she contented herself for the time being with her usual chuckle, and left her host well pleased with the characteristic little compliment he had contrived.

"Good evening, Duchess," said Lady Turquoise, advancing with a pleasant smile. Lady Gwendolen, whose greetings on their arrival had been of a decidedly acidulated flavour, had retired to some unknown regions to recruit her exhausted energies with a lump of sugar soaked in spirits of camphor.

"Why, how do you do, Lady Turquoise?" responded the Duchess, heartily. "We're quite strangers, I declare.

Pray tell me, now, how many times have you passed The Hyacinths lately without coming in to see me?"

"Never once," replied her ladyship, with a laugh; "and you ought to think better of me, Duchess, than to imagine me capable of such a thing. I've scarcely stirred outside the castle grounds for the last month."

"Ah! well, I forgive you," said the Duchess, equably. "But where's the—wasn't there another, Lady Turquoise, dair? an old lady, who has been staying here too?"

"Lady Gloatover?" replied Lady Turquoise, sinking her voice. "Yes; she's still here. In fact, she's almost at your elbow."

"Oh, my gracious me!" ejaculated the Duchess, *sotto voce*, turning rather red.

"Pray don't let me disturb you," said the old woman suddenly, in a stony voice. "The Duchess of Moneysworth, I believe."

"You are quite correct, madam," replied that lady, recovering herself. "It's a great blessing, is a good memory."

"It scarcely requires an unusual memory not to have forgotten the charming day we both spent at your Grace's a few weeks ago," interposed Lady Turquoise, with her winning smile.

"Oh, I haven't forgotten it, by any means," drawled Lady Gloatover. "It was one of the hottest days we have

had this year, and I caught a violent cold by eating my dinner on the grass."

"Doo, I reckon," remarked a raucous, twangy voice, suddenly breaking in upon the conversation. All the three ladies started; and the Duchess, turning in the direction of the sound, beheld a tall, wiry-haired, sallow-visaged gentleman, standing at his ease close by, his hands clasped under the tails of a very badly made dress-coat. Lady Turquoise bit her lip to prevent herself from laughing, while Lady Gloatover glared as unconsciously at him as if he had been a stone image.

"Doo, I make no doubt," repeated the gentleman, in an easy and familiar way. "The doos at night air heavy hereabouts; and people at our time of life, ma'am, can hardly be too careful how they expose themselves to it after dusk."

These observations being clearly addressed to Lady Gloatover, the other ladies naturally left her to answer them. A bronze griffin, however, could scarcely have given less signs of hearing that did that outraged dowager.

"You air evidently not acquainted with me, ma'am," pursued the stranger, equably. "Allow me to present myself. My name is Mass; Mr. Bawston Mass. I hail from the United States, and am happy to have met you, ma'am."

Lady Gloatover turned scarlet with indignation, and,

fortifying herself behind her square eyeglass, fixed her gaze with stolid patience against the opposite wall.

"Lady unwell?" asked Mr. Mass, in an audible aside to Lady Turquoise. "Suffers from near sight, I reckon, as well as deafness. Ah! well, we ain't none of us so young as we once was.—Pray, have you any other infirmities, ma'am?"

Lady Gloatover dropped her glass and began fanning herself with energy. The Duchess clapped her hand over her mouth, and gave evidence of internal convulsions which threatened every moment to explode in an irresistible guffaw. At last Lady Turquoise came to the rescue.

"I think, perhaps, that lady does not know you," she said, in a quiet though significant undertone. "In England, you should be aware, it is not customary for gentlemen to enter into conversation with ladies to whom they have not been introduced."

"Not know me?" repeated Mr. Mass, in unfeigned surprise. "Why, yes, she does; I've just introdooced myself to her. The boot's on the other leg, I guess. She knows me well enough; my name's Bawston Mass. But I have *not* the pleasure of knowing hers. Pray, ma'am, may I ask you who you air?"

"Take him away! Take him away, somebody, at once!" screamed Lady Gloatover, now losing all control

over herself. Everybody within hearing turned round in astonishment, and the hum of conversation in their immediate neighbourhood ceased. "Lord Pulvilio!" continued the dowager, as that useful nobleman was seen approaching, "your arm, if you please. Thank God!" and with this pious ejaculation her ladyship was led palpitating out of danger, in the direction of the refreshment-room.

"Now that is one of the most sing'lar experiences I have had since I landed in your country," remarked Mr. Mass, in a tone of thoughtful deliberation, to the Duchess and Lady Turquoise. "There's something wrong with that old lady, now; she can't be comfortable somewhere. Laced too tight, maybe. I guess I'll go and inquire after her health, and lend a hand at easing her a bit."

"Pray don't think of doing anything of the kind," interposed Lady Turquoise, hastily. "Lady Gloatover is not unwell, as you appear to imagine. Lord Pulvilio is with her."

"I want to know!" ejaculated Mr. Mass, in genuine surprise.

"You have probably not been very long in England, Sir," said the Duchess, in her old-fashioned way.

"You air right, ma'am," replied Mr. Mass, delighted to find somebody willing to talk with him. "I left Amurr'ca last Fall, and landed on these shores in No-vember. Consequently I have been here just ten months and tew days."

"Oh," said the Duchess, not knowing very well how to proceed.

"I hope you've been pleased with your visit so far," remarked Lady Turquoise, taking her cue from the elder lady.

"I have so, ma'am," answered Mr. Mass. "I consider England a tall country. We don't run to deuks in Amurr'ca, and that's a fact; but every country has its own institootions, and I quarrel with none. Only when a lady is spoken to in Amurr'ca she ginerally responds. But that's neither here nor there. Might I ask, ma'am, who is that old gentleman over there, talking to a lady with a blue tail?"

"Oh, my gracious!" exclaimed the Duchess. "A lady with a blue tail!"

"A blue train," corrected Lady Turquoise. "That is Sir Jupiter Rampant, formerly Commissioner of Pills and Sticking-plaster in Prince Edward's Island."

"And how long was he there?" inquired Mr. Mass. "How long was he Commissioner in Prince Edward's Island?"

"About fourteen years, I believe," said Lady Turquoise.

"And how much has he *stole*, now, do you suppose?" pursued the stranger, reflectively.

"Stole!" uttered Lady Turquoise, aghast.

"As a public man, in an influential position, he no doubt made his pickings," explained Mr. Mass; "else what 'ud

be the good of being a public man. Some git more, some less. I s'pose your members of Parliament, now, make a good thing when there's a private bill to pass. Nat'ally enough, else why should they spend such tre-mendous sums on their elections? Life, ladies, is all specl'ation, put it which way you will. I've specl'ated all my life. I made the dollars by specl'ation, and nothing else; and I've come to England on specl'ation too."

"I should be careful, were I you, whom you question on these subjects," said Lady Turquoise, stiffly. "I'm afraid you will find yourself open to serious misconstruction sometimes. You may not be aware that I am myself an American by birth, and I cannot but consider such generalisations most unbecoming."

Happily, just at this moment, some fresh arrivals attracted the attention of both Mr. Mass and his fair countrywoman. Eric Charteris and Captain Ricochet had arrived during the conversation just reported, and were watching the dancers from one of the recesses; and now, during a pause in the programme, appeared Naomi Insight, who, to her great disgust, was being chaperoned by Mrs. Buxom. Tresham, though not a dancing man, was in attendance, and the sight caused an angry frown to pass over the brow of Eric. He immediately strode up to Naomi, and, without deigning a glance at Tresham, asked her for a waltz.

"With pleasure," she replied, somewhat mechanically. "Arthur, will you find a seat for Mrs. Buxom?"

"Don't mind me, Miss Naomi, dear," said the old lady, smiling. "Let me see you dancing along with the rest, and take care not to overheat yourself." Whereupon Naomi walked off with her partner

"Come into the conservatories," said Eric, rather abruptly, after they had finished their waltz. He had not uttered a word during the dance, and Naomi was feeling rather bored.

"How grumpy you are this evening!" she remarked with a slight pout, as they passed out of the heated ball-room.

"I don't know of anything to make me particularly gay," replied Eric. "What's this I hear about your being engaged to Tresham?"

"How can I tell what you may have heard?" retorted Naomi.

"Come, Naomi, don't beat about the bush," said Eric, rather more graciously. "Is it true you're going to marry Tresham?"

"It's perfectly true that I'm engaged to Mr. Tresham," said Naomi, with intentional coldness. "What then?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," returned Eric, tossing his head angrily. "Of course you can please yourself."

"Of course," said Naomi. "Nobody has been disputing my right to do that, I should hope."

"What's the matter with you to-night?" broke out Eric, passionately. "You're not generally so disagreeable to me. First, you and Tresham—confound him!—steal a march upon me——"

"Steal a march!" interrupted Naomi, indignantly.

"Yes, steal a march!" almost shouted Eric. Naomi coloured to the eyes, and withdrew her hand from his arm. "And then," he continued in a lower tone, "and then you brazen it out——"

"This is monstrous!" cried Naomi. "What have I ever done that you should dare to talk to me like this? What right have you to criticise my actions?"

"Have you given me none?" said Eric. "Can you look me in the face and say we've never been more to each other than mere acquaintances? And all the time you were in love with Tresham—Tresham, of all men in the world! Naomi, you've played me false; upon my soul you have. You ought to have let me know how things were going. But there; there's no use talking. It's done now, and I hope you're satisfied with your work."

Naomi looked straight before her, with a hard smile lurking at the corners of her mouth. At last her expression relaxed, and turning to her companion she said, more graciously, "You know that this is all nonsense, Eric. You have no reason to complain. You are angry because I

have accepted Mr. Tresham without telling you about it; but you must admit that you never gave me any cause to think——"

"To think what?" said Eric, as Naomi hesitated.

"To think that you cared whether I did or no," she concluded, a faint blush tinging her olive cheek.

"O Naomi!" half-whispered Eric, under his breath.

"Then you trusted too much to my penetration, you see," resumed the girl, with a short laugh. "Let's hope you'll be wiser another time."

"You are heartless!" exclaimed Eric, in a deep tone of indignation. "I see it all now. What an idiot I've been all along! But don't let me detain you any longer. Shall I take you to—Mr. Tresham?"

"Thanks; here he is," said Naomi, as Tresham approached, all unconscious of what had been passing between the two. Then she took Tresham's arm, dismissing Eric with a curt nod. Eric stood glowering at them in rather a foolish and undignified way, and Tresham threw a glance of unsuspicious inquiry at him over his shoulder as he turned in the direction of the ball-room with Naomi.

"What's wrong with Eric?" said he, lightly.

"Got a pain in his temper," replied Naomi, carelessly, using one of those not over-refined expressions which occasionally set her lover's teeth on edge. "He was rather put

out about—you know what; he thought we ought to have told him. Don't trouble about him. I say, Arthur, I've got something to ask you. Have you said anything to Lady Sharp?"

"About our engagement? Yes; I happened to see her yesterday, and told her."

"Did she like it?"

"Well, I don't quite know. I don't think she cares what becomes of me now."

"Rather rough on me," replied Naomi. "But I'm sure I don't care. She'll find she can't lord it over you much longer. Did she congratulate you?"

"Yes, in an icy sort of way. At least she said she supposed she ought to; but whether she ever did it actually I can't remember. We can be happy even if she didn't though, that's one comfort."

"But didn't she say anything about *me?*" persisted Naomi. "Whether she liked me, or what she thought of me, or—or anything like that?"

"Not a word. Except that the news had greatly surprised her."

"Fusty old thing!" returned the girl. "However, it doesn't much matter. Now I've got to dance again, and here comes my partner." Whereupon Miss Naomi left Tresham, and was soon whirling round the room with

young Lord Binnacle at the rate of about ten miles an hour. Tresham continued his walk, and soon found himself face to face with the Duchess.

"Well, Mr. Tresham, and what have you got to say for yourself, I should like to know?" demanded her Grace, with a very badly assumed show of indignation. "What does all this mean, pray? Going and getting engaged, and I don't know what all, and never telling me a word about it! Why, here's Margaret Ashe been dying to congratulate you; you never saw such a state as she's been in. And pray, where's Miss Naomi? Now, I'm going to tell you a secret. I don't know when you intend to set up housekeeping; but you must let me know in good time, for I mean to carpet your house for you from top to bottom. There!"

"Oh, Duchess! you are kindness itself," said Tresham, his breath quite taken away by this munificent announcement. "I don't know how to thank you. I shall bring Naomi to make her acknowledgments in person, if your Grace will allow me, in a few days."

"Do, my boy," said the old lady. "I should like to see a little more of her; and if you really intend to get married, you two, why the sooner you do it the better. You know I had a little scheme in my head about you, Mr. Tresham; I thought—indeed, I hoped—you might have taken a fancy

to somebody else. I'm a regular old matchmaker, and that's the truth; but I see it's better to mind one's own business after all, and let the young people arrange these matters among themselves."

"I'm sure I 'ope you'll let me congratulate you too, Mr. Tresham," said Miss Ashe, beaming at him cross-wise through her spectacles. "It's a most unexpected pleasure —he! he! he! I *quite* thought that Mr. Charteris was to be the 'appy man!"

"Hold your tongue, do, Margaret Ashe, you great goose," exclaimed the Duchess, sharply. "What'll you be saying next, I wonder? Lor! Mr. Tresham, dair, there's been such a strange man here—lor! you should have heard him talking to Lady Gloatover; he regularly drove her out of the room; and then he asked the most extraordinary questions about Sir Jupiter Rampant—I thought I should have screamed!"

"Who was it?" asked Tresham, smiling.

"Well, he said his name was Mass," returned the old lady. "Do you know anything of him?"

"Bawston Mass!" exclaimed Tresham; "why, he's the great Chicago millionaire. He contracts for everything, from railways and Government loans down to pork-sausages; his income is said to be something fabulous—ten dollars a minute, I believe. But you mentioned my good friend Sir Jupiter Rampant. Does your Grace know him?"

"Know him? Oh, very well indeed," replied the Duchess. "He's an old rascal. I've often told him so. Lor, if there isn't that American man coming over here again! Do, Mr. Tresham, dair, go and fetch Miss Naomi. I haven't seen her to-night, and I want to congratulate her in due form."

Just as Tresham was starting in search of his *fiancée*, Giraldi entered the ball-room. Naomi had finished her dance, and seeing Tresham approach, relinquished the arm of her late partner. Giraldi, however, was nearer, and, walking up to her, he wished her good evening with his usual candid smile. She stood apart with him for a moment.

"I hear I have to congratulate you," said the lad, quietly.

"Yes," returned Naomi, coolly. "That is—I suppose you refer to my engagement."

"Of course," said Giraldi, looking at her. "There's no secret about it now, I suppose."

"None that I am aware of," replied Naomi. "Have you seen Mr. Tresham this evening?"

"Not yet," said Giraldi.

"It's not fair that I should have all the congratulations," said Naomi, tossing her head. "One would think it was King Cophetua and the beggar-girl over again. People pay one very left-handed compliments sometimes."

Giraldi smiled. "I suppose you know your own worth," he said, in rather a bantering tone.

"I should hope I did," returned Naomi, defiantly.

"And does Mr. Tresham?" said Giraldi.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Naomi, turning upon him sharply. "If he thinks so highly of me as to ask me to——"

"Naomi, will you come and see the Duchess?" said Tresham, coming up. "Ah! Giraldi, I haven't seen you for an age. How are you, my dear boy?"

"Thanks, I'm all right," replied Giraldi, smiling. "You haven't been up to St. Gertrude's lately. Allow me to——"

"I'm engaged for the next Lancers, Arthur," interrupted Naomi, "and if we're to go and speak to the Duchess, we'd better do so at once."

"One moment," said Tresham. "I must just say a word to Giraldi. By the way, Giraldi, I was going to introduce you; but it seems that ceremony is unnecessary. Can you tell me how long Sir Jupiter is going to stay in this neighbourhood?"

"Excuse my intrusion, Mr. Tresham," said Miss Ashe, suddenly appearing in the group. "The Duchess has sent me to look after you. Her Grace is growing impatient to see Miss Insight."

"I beg a thousand pardons," replied Tresham, turning hastily round towards Naomi. She was standing about a yard off, and Eric Charteris was at her side. Their colloquy, which had been a very rapid one, was just finished; and Miss Ashe overheard the words—Naomi being the speaker—

"Very well, if you insist; on Saturday at five."

CHAPTER XIV.

LADY SHARP AND HER CHILDREN.

For some time previous to the events recounted in the last chapter, a very extraordinary change had been rapidly stealing over Lady Sharp. She had never been a lovable woman. Her peculiar views on religious matters prevented her from establishing any confidential relations with other women of her own station in life, and her bearing towards people generally was marked by an ill-concealed consciousness that she occupied an infinitely higher religious plane than they, and was altogether on an exceptionally familiar footing with the Deity. The periodical hospitalities at Brookfield Hall, though pleasant enough in their way, had lacked that atmosphere of frankness and cordiality which alone engenders true enjoyment, and which had done so much to popularise the garden-parties at The Hyacinths. Latterly these had been discontinued, and Lady Sharp had begun even to deny herself to visitors. Even her personal appearance had deteriorated. Instead of being the portly, expensively-dressed woman she was when we first made her

acquaintance, she had acquired an unhealthy fatness, and become not only dowdy, but absolutely slatternly and shabby. No one knew the reason of this change, for she never opened her lips. It was noticed, however, that she was looking miserable, as if some carking care were preying upon her inwardly. She got a wild, haggard, hunted expression in the eyes, and a listlessness of demeanour, extremely painful to behold; while at the same time she assumed an air of sullenness and silence, which repelled all overtures of comfort.

The effect of all this upon Eric and Edith was of course very bad. Eric grew daily more estranged from his mother, and seldom showed up at meals. Where he passed his time Lady Sharp never knew, and did not seem to care. Billiards and smoking, with libations of brandy-and-soda, were probably the worst forms of dissipation in which he indulged, and there is no doubt he indulged in all three more than was at all good for him; but there were occasions on which he had been met wandering moodily about the country, in a way not usually characteristic of so gay and pleasure-loving a young gentleman. Whenever he did appear in Lady Sharp's gloomy and depressing dining-room, his mother would look up at him with a cold, almost malignant glance, never giving him one word of kindliness or welcome; believing, no doubt, poor woman, in all the

honesty of her distempered imagination, that he spent his absences in such scenes of riot and debauchery as rendered his presence unfit for her pure house. Nor did poor Edith lead a very cheerful life. All her little caressing attentions were silently repulsed by the brooding woman, who sat from morning till night mechanically engaged in some coarse needlework, or endeavouring to fix her attention upon the last new book on prophecy. That was the dreadful part of Lady Sharp's condition—her brooding, impenetrable silence. She never complained, she never asked questions, she never passed the slightest remark or showed the faintest interest in anything or anybody. The only person whose presence seemed to afford a half-acknowledged relief to her was Mr. Leech. Whenever he came, an extra dish would grace the squalid board, and an unaccustomed bottle of poor Sir John's old port be produced for his delectation after dinner. The good man was not slow to observe the relief imparted by his presence to his dear sister, and his pastoral visitations soon increased in frequency and length.

A few mornings after the ball at Castle Sudds, Eric appeared at his mother's breakfast-table, late as usual, with apparently some fixed purpose in his mind. Edith handed him a cup of tea, and he helped himself to some cold bacon, which he began to eat with what seemed more determination than appetite. After a few minutes, he said, abruptly—

"By the way, mother, I wanted to tell you that I am going up to London."

Lady Sharp lifted her cold, dull eyes and looked at him. "Indeed," she said. Nothing more.

"Whom are you going with, Eric dear?" ventured Edith.

"With Ricochet," returned Eric. "At least, he's already gone; but he's asked me to go up and stay with him. I can't stand this sort of thing for ever."

"It will be very nice for him, won't it, mamma dear?" said Edith.

"No doubt," returned her ladyship, briefly. "London presents far greater facilities even than Heathercombe for souls that doom themselves to ruin. I am not surprised. He is free to go when and where he chooses."

"Mamma!" exclaimed Edith, pained and horrified.

"Will you take another cup of tea, Eric?" said Lady Sharp, in her usual formal tones.

"No!" thundered Eric, pushing his chair back from the table. "You have no right, no reason, to speak of me in that way. It is barbarous. What do you mean? What do you charge me with? Who has been telling you lies about me?"

"If your own conscience doesn't tell you, it would be useless for me to do so," said his mother, rising and moving towards the door.

"My conscience does *not* tell me," cried Eric, furiously. "And what is more, I don't believe that any one has told *you*," he continued with increasing excitement. "It is your own cruel, uncharitable suspicions, and nothing else. You make my home miserable to me, and then when I seek a little cheerfulness elsewhere, you taunt me with committing God knows what iniquity. *I* don't. If I do, the sin's at your door. It's you——"

"Eric! Eric!" cried Edith, beseechingly.

"Let him continue," said Lady Sharp, in a scarcely audible voice, her eyes gleaming with resentment. "You say your home is miserable," she proceeded, speaking to Eric but not looking at him. "What do you expect? Your heart is bound up with the things of time and sense. You sin, and you have no sense of sin. You love the things which perish in the using, and have no taste for those of eternity. Shall I fill my house with snares and vanities to pander to your depraved tastes? Shall I do that which would bring your blood upon my head when you perish? Think you I have no sins of my own to answer for, without —ah! God, ah! God," muttered the unhappy woman, in a choking voice. Her hands fell by her side, and she sank helplessly into the nearest chair.

"Dear mamma, you are not well," cried Edith, terrified, falling on her knees beside her. "Don't be angry with

her, Eric; you see she is not well. I wish you'd go out a little more, mamma dear. I'm sure it's very bad for you to be indoors so much. Look what a beautiful day it is. Won't you put on your bonnet and come with me a little way?"

"No, no," murmured Lady Sharp, recovering herself a little. "Leave me to myself. I shall be better alone."

"What is it, mother?" said Eric, in a more softened tone, approaching her.

"Nothing—nothing," groaned Lady Sharp. If she felt any yearning towards her eldest born, she hid it under a mask of apathy. He was not one of the elect, had neither part nor lot in the matters which possessed such an overpowering interest for herself; but she felt that even she was not yet perfect, for she could not quite bring herself to say Amen to his damnation.

"Mother, it's no use our going on like this, you know," said Eric, sitting on a chair beside her. "There's never been much sympathy between us, but still, hang it all! you know, you are my mother. What is it you accuse me of? Let's have it out. Fair play's a jewel, and it's not fair to listen to a lot of slander about me behind my back, and never give me a chance of proving that it's all a lie."

"Are you or are you not a sinner?" demanded Lady Sharp, solemnly. Edith, not knowing very well what turn

the conversation was taking, rose with a faint blush and prepared to leave the room.

"What are you going away for?" cried Eric, impetuously. "Heavens and earth! do you think there's anything not fit for you to hear? It's too bad—by Heavens, it's too bad! A sinner? Of course I'm a sinner; I don't pretend to be a saint. But I've never knowingly injured a fellow-creature in my life, and that's more than many folks can say."

"Eric, do you believe in judgment?"

"Of course I do," said Eric, "though some people seem to have very little of it, if we're to go by all the stupid things they say."

"I can listen no further to your blasphemies," said Lady Sharp, with an almost imperceptible shudder. "Go to London; go to destruction in your own way. I fear I should sin in praying for you any more. There are some who are said to be condemned already, and for such——"

"Mamma, here's Mr. Leech," said Edith, glad even of such an interruption to this frightful scene. Eric started up with clenched fists, and awaited the approach of his old enemy. He had been cruelly wounded, and whatever softness there had been in his heart before was now frozen into steely hardness.

"My dear sister!"—It required no gleam of blue spectacles or sound of stealthy footsteps to identify the speaker.

Mr. Leech advanced to Lady Sharp's chair with a smile at once deprecating and sympathetic, and saluted her cold hand with an affectionate but respectful squeeze. "How bright and well you are looking! Surrounded by your dear family, too. Miss Edith, you are always blooming. And there's dear Mr. Eric. Are you quite well, my dear young friend?"

"Quite, thanks," said Eric, briefly.

"Health of body is indeed a blessing," resumed Mr. Leech, didactically; "but how much greater a blessing is health of soul! We are old friends, you know, Mr. Eric and Miss Edith; and I'm going to take the privilege of an old friend and well-wisher of you both. I've brought you each a little book—just a little book, you know. Surely there's no harm in that? See: *Who's Who, Now and Forever.* That's for you, Miss Edith. And here, dear Mr. Eric; here's *The Pestilence that Walketh in Darkness:* two sweet little books, written by a dear saint now gone to his rest. Will you promise me to read yours, dear Miss Edith?"

"If you wish," said Edith, coldly, seeing that a reply was expected.

"And you, Mr. Eric?"

"What?" said Eric.

"Will you read the little tract I have brought you?"

"No," said Eric, throwing it upon the table. "I think

the less one knows of pests and pestilences the better, whatever sort they are; and I don't believe that reading that tract of yours would do me one bit of good."

"Do you wilfully close your heart against the Truth?"

"Truth!" repeated Eric, scornfully. "Against what *you* call truth—yes, I do; wilfully and deliberately. I don't believe in a single word of it; I don't believe it is truth, and never shall. You'd better give me up, Mr. Leech. You'll never make anything of me."

"Exactly, my dear young friend," replied Mr. Leech, with the complacent air of a physician who hears a patient describe symptoms in exact accordance with his own diagnosis. "I know that that is your state of mind. You are in a state of wrath, unregenerate, and in the gall of bitterness; you hate the things of the Spirit; they disgust and weary you. Of course you reject the offers of salvation, preferring the husks of this life. Now *I* want to *convert* you from all these things, and this can only be done by the ministry of the Word. We have often talked over this matter, and prayed together for you——"

"We!—who?" demanded Eric, with a menacing cloud upon his brow.

"Your dear sainted mother and myself," replied Mr. Leech; "but hitherto, alas——"

"My mother and you praying together for ME!" almost

shouted the young fellow, now losing all control over himself. "Have you no sense of propriety, of common decency? Mother, is this thing true? Can you have gone down on your knees side by side with this canting maw-worm, this hypocritical sponger on other people's goods, and joined him in his libellous so-called prayers for *me?* I won't believe it—I can't. It's too gross altogether. Mother, speak to me. Does he say the truth?"

"Be silent!" hissed Lady Sharp, her mouth working as in a frenzy, and her eyes surrounded by livid rings of red. "You may insult me, your mother, but him you shall not insult. He is my friend—my guest. He is a man of God, and will sit in judgment on you at the Last Day. Prayed for you? Ay, and the heavens have been as brass above us. There—you'd better go. The presence of you is a pain to me."

Strange to say, Eric had by this time become quite cool. His quick, warm, affectionate nature had been cruelly hurt by his mother's wild reproaches; but now, for a moment, his judgment attained the ascendant, and he saw that she was scarcely responsible for her words. He looked sorrowfully at the suffering woman, for suffering she most clearly was, and that acutely; and, without deigning a glance at the chapel minister, quietly left the room accompanied by Edith.

In a few minutes, however, the reaction came. Edith burst into an uncontrollable fit of crying, and this added to the returning exasperation of Eric. He grew impatient with Edith for giving way, and then gave way himself, his passion finding vent in a perfect torrent of abuse. He cursed his own insufferable fate. He cursed the whining hypocrite, as he called the Rev. Mr. Leech, who had gained such a vile ascendancy over his misguided mother. He swore she couldn't be his mother, to treat him in such a way—he must be a changeling or a foundling. But his resolution was taken. He'd stand the misery no longer. He'd go up to London, and try to drown his rage in dissipation. What did it matter? Nobody cared for him; neither his mother, nor the girl on whom he thought he had set his heart. Then he put on his hat, and strode gloomily out of the house, banging the front door after him as violently as he could.

CHAPTER XV.

MORE CLOUDS.

Not long after getting quit of his mother's house, Eric happened to meet Tresham. Under other circumstances he would have been only too glad to pour all his troubles into the parson's sympathising ear; but now Tresham himself seemed in the conspiracy against him, and in fact represented one of his most bitter grievances. Tresham was just starting on his pastoral rounds, and wore an expression of somewhat perplexed gravity. He had had an interview with Naomi early that very morning which had left him plenty of food for meditation. He had run in after breakfast for a few moments, and found Naomi in one of her most wilful moods. It was almost impossible for him to get accustomed to these moods of hers. He was unable to understand why the same person should be beaming and gracious one day, reserved and capricious the next. Mr. Insight never seemed conscious of these changes, or, if he were, they did not affect him much. He kept up a cheerful smile while they were all together—sometimes, Tresham

fancied, at the expense of some little effort; but, after all, he was only her father, and not likely to be constantly swayed between joy and anguish by the uncertain moods of his own child. On this occasion, however, there had been something different from usual. Naomi and Tresham were strolling about the garden together, when the former suddenly woke up from a fit of silence by remarking—

"What a strange thing it is, Arthur, that you are so bent on marrying me!"

"My dear Naomi!" ejaculated Tresham, surprised.

"Well, but isn't it?" pursued Naomi, argumentatively. "You know I told you you'd better not, didn't I?"

"Don't talk like that, dear," said Tresham. "It makes me feel uncomfortable. We made up our minds on that subject ever so long ago, you know."

"Yes, I know we did," replied Naomi, dreamily. "I'm not proposing—anything else, of course. It's no use giving you advice; you never take it. Do you think we shall get on well together, Arthur? You don't repent of your bargain?"

"Bargain!" echoed Tresham, uneasily. "What can you be thinking of? You distress me by saying such things. Don't I live for you, and you only? Isn't it my dearest wish to call you mine at once—and always?"

"Is it?" said Naomi, not prosaically, but with an air of wishing to fathom Tresham's thoughts.

"Yes, my sweet," said he, and kissed her.

"Don't you remember that thing in Shakspeare about if you want to cook a beefsteak it's better to be done quickly?" continued Naomi, with charming vagueness.

"Cook a beefsteak!" repeated her lover, now hopelessly at sea.

"La, Arthur, how dull you are!" cried the girl, pettishly. "You know what I mean as well as I do. Something about 'when it's done if it's underdone then it ought to be done quickly.' But there, never mind. What I want you to understand is that there are other things in the world that ought to be done quickly too. O Arthur!" she cried, and stopped. "Arthur," she went on in a low, hurried voice, "marry me soon if you want to marry me at all. I'm not sure of myself. I don't know what I may do. You know how impulsive I am. You say you'll take me for better or worse, and if you mean to, do it—do it soon. I suppose you think this is rather a queer thing for a girl to say? Of course you do. But if you only knew—I mean, if you only knew me better than you do, I should feel ever so much happier—even though you were to change your mind. Tell me, Arthur, when do you intend our marriage to take place?"

"I'd marry you to-morrow if I could," said Tresham, who was beginning to feel partly bewildered and partly frightened by the extraordinary speech he had just listened to.

"You would?" said Naomi, looking up at him; "then why don't you?"

"My dear child! in the first place, I haven't a roof to cover you; in the second place, I haven't bought the license; in the third place, you've got no wedding-gown——"

"Now you're laughing at me," said Naomi, pouting.

"Well, and you deserve to be laughed at for being such a goose," retorted Tresham, trying to pass it over lightly. "But to be serious, your father is very anxious we shouldn't be married in a hurry. He told me once he wanted us to wait two years——"

"Two years!" cried Naomi, almost with a shriek.

"——but I said that was out of the question. My own idea is about six months from now. That would give us time to get everything ready comfortably. The dear old Duchess is going to buy us all our carpets, and there's that house of——Good heavens, Naomi, what's the matter now? Are you ill?"

"No—no," gasped the girl, as she sank upon a garden seat. Her face was very white and her eyes looked glazed. Tresham now felt thoroughly alarmed as well as puzzled. This sudden eagerness for the marriage to take place was strange enough, but the expression in Naomi's face was stranger still. Had this girl any secret? All the dire suspicions and doubts that he had harboured formerly came

crowding back into his mind. The insinuations of Captain Ricochet, and Mr. Insight's own reluctance to accede to the marriage for Tresham's sake, as he distinctly said—not for Naomi's—all reappeared in a new and vivid light. And yet he was still in the dark about it all. There seemed no clue to the mystery.

Just then Mr. Insight appeared at the garden door, looking like a very ugly, benevolent gargoyle, surrounded by clusters of overhanging roses. Tresham felt immensely relieved, and looked round at the minister with an inviting smile. Mr. Insight walked up to them and sat down.

"Come, my dear," he said to Naomi, his shrewd eye taking in half the situation at a glance. "What is it? You have been overheating yourself. Tresham, you shouldn't let her overheat herself. What have you been talking about, you two?"

"To be frank with you, we've been talking about our wedding," said Tresham, with forced gaiety. "I've been telling Naomi that I hope we shall be able to get everything ready in about six months' time, but I don't think much before. Perhaps, by stretching a point, we might be married on Valentine's-day, you know. Don't you think that would be a good plan?"

"Excellent," said Mr. Insight, promptly. "Naomi, my girl, let us be thankful to God for your good fortune. Come, six

months isn't long to wait. You've your whole life before you. And I pray most fervently it may prove a happy one for *both*," he added mentally, as an anxious look passed over his face.

"I must go now, dear," said Tresham, rising. "It's nearly half-past nine. Don't be low-spirited. We must both try and make each other happy. Only six months at the outside, and meeting every day meanwhile! Why, it's Paradise. Good-bye, goosey; I've lots of work to do."

Then he kissed her, looking brave and handsome in the morning sunlight. Naomi submitted passively, and made an attempt to look more cheerful; while Mr. Insight smiled benignly on the pair, a dash of humour lurking about the corners of his mouth, as he accompanied Tresham to the gate.

It was when coming from this interview that the parson encountered Eric Charteris. Poor Eric! He had no slight reason to be dissatisfied with fate. It could not be denied that she had used him hardly, and that things looked very doleful to him on that sweet September morning. The sight of the triumphant lover, coming obviously from the direction of the Insights' cottage, only increased his wrath, and, instead of stopping Tresham with his usual boisterous cordiality, he hurried past him with a curt "'Morning, Tresham," which pained and surprised his friend. The parson, on his side, however, did not feel in much of a mood for conversation, and was content to pass on to his duties

without making an effort to bring Eric to book for his sullenness.

Nor were Edith's thoughts much more cheerful than her brother's. After Eric had gone out, she flew up to her room, and, woman-like, found what relief she could in a good healthy cry. But she was not only unhappy; she was terribly anxious about her mother. Was Lady Sharp becoming a religious monomaniac? She had heard of such things. There was a dreadful woman she used to meet when a child, who dressed herself from head to foot in blue. She wore a huge blue hat, and was blue all over, even to her boots. This woman, she had been told, was a religious monomaniac. People said she believed she was the Sky. And could it be possible, thought poor Edith, half-laughing and half-crying, that her own mother had such a doom as this before her? That, surely, would be the crown and climax of her troubles. And yet there was a more odious suggestion still, which she repelled with horror, and which yet was a source of constant torment to her. There was a threatening possibility that her mother might be sufficiently infatuated to marry Mr. Leech. That would be almost worse than if she were to go mad outright. The horror of having that man as master of their home would surely drive both her and Eric out of it forthwith. And as Edith sat, sorrowful and wondering, in her own room, she pictured to her-

self the scene below, where the minister and Lady Sharp were still enjoying what they called the communion of saints. It was a melancholy sort of enjoyment as far as the poor woman was concerned. The minister, unctuous and didactic, pouring his own patent preparation of the Balm of Gilead into his dear sister's spiritual wounds; and his dear sister wincing under the application, but drawn by an unhealthy yet irresistible attraction towards her ghostly comforter. The positions of these two had been undergoing a gradual change. Lady Sharp was no longer the gracious patroness, and Mr. Leech the grateful recipient. She was now the invalid, and he the strong physician. Little by little his influence had grown, until she had become plastic in his hands. Then it was that the curse had overtaken her. It was owing to his ministrations that she had learned not only to regard her own children as foredoomed reprobates, but to fancy herself upon so supreme a spiritual elevation as to be filled with morbid dreads lest she might fall and perish too. This was her secret agony. Did not the angels fall from their dizzy height of holiness? And if they, why not she? Then there would be no more grace for her, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment. She would have committed the Unpardonable Sin. She, like Lucifer, Son of the Morning, would become a devil; worse, rather—a lost soul. And the thought, eating into her vitals, was slowly driving her mad.

It was not till late in the evening that Eric returned to the house. He came bounding up the stairs, and greeted Edith on the landing with a boisterous and quite unaccustomed kiss. "Keep your pecker up, old girl," he said with more than usual kindness. "It's deuced hard lines for both of us, isn't it? I'm off to London on Saturday. And look here, you know; don't you stay moping in the house. The mater doesn't want you any more than she wants me, and there's no sort of good in it. Go out and see old Beatrice and the Duchess. That'll be ever so much better for you than staying and mooning here."

"I believe you're right," said Edith, drying her eyes.

"What have you been doing with yourself all day?" inquired Eric.

"Dr. Urquhart came in this afternoon," replied Edith. "I talked with him for a little time. He was very kind."

"Urquhart's a rattling good fellow," said Eric. "I'm glad you've had somebody to cheer you up. Well, good-night. Pity you can't come to London with me, isn't it?"

Then the two separated for the night. Lady Sharp had retired to her room some hours before, looking, at any rate, not much better for her prolonged exercises with Mr. Leech. She tossed uneasily about for hours, and the dawn was beginning to break when she sank into a moaning, troubled sleep.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DEPUTATION; AND HOW IT FARED.

The events we have chronicled in the preceding chapter took place on Wednesday, the 2nd of September; Eric Charteris having fixed his departure for London on the following Saturday, intending to take the night-train which left Heathercombe at seven in the evening.

Ever since the celebrated missionary Sunday on which Mr. Tresham had given such dire offence to the stricter portion of the religious world by his heterodox notions about Elijah, that erratic divine had been rapidly falling into still deeper disrepute. He was known to have been thrown off by Lady Sharp. This lost him any credit that might have clung to him from the support of one whose orthodoxy, to say nothing of her social position, was unimpeachable. But this was not all. He had gone and "engaged himself" to a young, flighty, irreligious girl, herself the daughter of a rival minister whose views were broad. The act had offended the more rigid members of the Church party, who looked upon the young clergyman

as guilty of treachery to his cloth; and it had scandalised the flocks of Mr. Leech, the pastor of the Little Hill, and Mr. Doom, the shepherd of Bethabara. Many were the Dissenting tea-parties at which the cream and muffins were seasoned with the delicious sauce of groans, and sighs, and innuendoes. The Rev. Israel Doom took frequent occasion to "improve" the fall of his young brother, and would often point out, between his mouthfuls of buttered toast, the futility alike of the Ordination Service and the Thirty-nine Articles to prevent lapses in either orthodoxy or morals. In these genial conclaves nobody was regarded with greater reverence than Mr. Leech. The democracy of Dissent was not proof against the pretensions of one who was the chosen guide of Lady Sharp, in addition to being so precious a vessel in his own person. But, in fact, the unholy alliance contemplated by the incumbent of the district church was not the only sin that he had fallen into. He had sunk deeper and deeper into the slough of heterodoxy. He was suspected of holding carnal views upon the date and authorship of the Pentateuch. He had refused a request from one of his Sunday-school teachers to preach a sermon upon the speaking of Balaam's ass, saying (so it was reported) that he did not consider the occurrence sufficiently uncommon at the present day to justify its being specially treated in the pulpit. He had spoken approvingly of

Professor Robertson Smith, and openly deplored the death of Mr. Darwin. Then he had introduced practices in the district church which horrified the souls of those who went elsewhere. He was on terms of friendship with Father Aloysius, and it was even said that on one occasion he had been present at vespers at St. Gertrude's. He had entered into the closest intimacy with the Independent minister, and ignored both Mr. Doom and Mr. Leech with an arrogance that was intolerable. The only point on which Bethabara and the Little Hill were at friendly issue was the exact direction in which the unhappy young man was falling. Bethabara leaned towards the Lap of the Scarlet Lady, as the Rev. Mr. Doom finely put it in one of his most impressive periods; while the Little Hill was rather in favour of the Sink of Infidelity, a theory that was ably amplified by Mr. Leech. This little difference between the members of the two flocks gave rise to many sprightly discussions, and instead of being a source of any unchristian rivalry, was rather fruitful in enlivening the intercourse of the two churches, each of which had thus an incentive to bring forward its own instances and arguments in support of the view it had adopted.

Suddenly it became known—how, we do not pretend to say; but somehow it leaked out—that Mr. Fairweather, the Rector of the parish, was offended with Mr. Tresham

too. This piece of news caused an immense flutter in the Dissenting dovecotes. Hitherto the chapel people had regarded the Rev. Chauncey Fairweather as a dumb dog, an unfaithful shepherd. Now he rose immeasurably in their estimation. Before, he was a supercilious foe; now, he loomed big before them as a powerful ally. With the Rector on their side, they could certainly present a formidable front to the adversary. Indeed, one or two gentle souls, principally women, began to conceive a sort of reluctant pity for the misguided youth they were now in a position to crush. This foolish weakness was, however, soon dissipated by the sterner spirits of the party. Their dear sisters forgot, they pointed out, the mischief Mr. Tresham had been doing. They, alas! poor feeble men, could not help the existence of infidels and Papists. That was a mysterious dispensation of Providence, to be regarded with due reverence and accepted in humble faith. But here was a professed teacher of religion who was suspected of both heresies; who had already, perhaps, seduced many souls from the truth, and who had certainly, without any "perhaps," drawn away many members from both Bethabara and the Little Hill. For that, be it understood, lay at the root of the grievance. It is not to be denied that since the advent of Mr. Tresham certain adherents of the two chapels in question, who had sat under their respective pastors for

years, had joined the congregation at the district church; attracted in the first place by curiosity, and then tempted to remain by the energetic and insidious discourses of the new incumbent. And there had been deserters from the parish church as well—a fact which was no doubt galling enough to the Rector, who had expressed himself rather intemperately about the "interference" of the intruder. He was scandalised, too, in his own lazy way, at the proposed alliance of Mr. Tresham with the Insights. It was to him a thing unheard-of that an ordained priest of the Church of England should mix himself up with the rabble of Dissent. All this gave him many pangs and twinges of annoyance, and he had frequently vented his displeasure while talking on the subject to his churchwardens in confidence. He was specially indignant at the compliment paid to Dissent by Tresham's intimacy with Mr. Insight, and writhed in spirit as he thought of the complacency with which the Dissenters must regard the friendship shown them by a brilliant young man who had succeeded in half emptying the parish church.

At last the Rev. Israel Doom, in confabulation with Rev. Issachar Leech, made a very startling and original proposal. It was nothing less than to enlist the assistance of the Rector himself, by appointing a deputation from both their chapels to represent to him the scandal brought upon the cause of

true religion by a clergyman in his own parish, and to request him to take such measures for its removal as he might deem fit. The two ministers sat gazing at each other, open-mouthed and open-eyed, for some seconds after Mr. Doom's audacious proposition. There was certainly something very tempting in the idea. It would give them immense *prestige* in the eyes of their respective followers. The vanity of the Rector would be flattered by such an appeal being made to him by the representatives of two Christian sects between whom and the Establishment there had been a lack of Christian confidence in the past. The subject of complaint would touch him in a tender place, and predispose him to sympathy with his fellow-sufferers. Mr. Doom and Mr. Leech talked over the matter with eagerness, and, as they told their friends, in a very prayerful spirit. Their wrestlings had been severe, but the path of duty was plainly marked out for them now. It was a debt they owed to the cause of pure and undefiled religion to use every means in their power to withstand the adversary who had come to destroy their peace, and the deputation to the Rector became a settled thing.

Mr. Fairweather was calmly enjoying the new-laid eggs and cream which always made their appearance at his handsomely appointed breakfast-table, when a large letter was brought in to him which caused him considerable surprise.

It was addressed in a straggling hand to the "Reverend Mr. Fairweather"— a superscription that made him wince —and began, "Reverend and dear Sir." The Rector pursed up his lips and frowned in sheer perplexity as he slowly took in the contents. "They, the undersigned ministers and deacons of the churches worshipping at Bethabara Chapel and the Little Hill, having certain grave and weighty matters upon which to consult the chief pastor of the Church in Heathercombe,"—h'm, h'm, h'm,—"intrude on his privacy"—"appoint a day"—"wait upon him at the Rectory"—and "remain his most faithful and obedient servants in the Lord." "Heavens alive!" cried the Rector in his amazement, "why, I don't know the men from Adam. What can be the matter now, I wonder? These Dissenters, these Dissenters; they're always up to something, I declare they are. Why can't they keep quiet, I should like to know? See them? Oh, I suppose I must see them; though upon my word," soliloquised the Rector, drawing himself up, "I really don't see that they have a right to make any such application." But the Rector, with all his dignity, was but human, and curiosity is a human weakness. He felt really curious to know what "the men" were after, and therefore returned an answer during the afternoon of the same day, couched statelily in the third person, appointing the following Thursday, at three of the clock p.m., for the reception of his visitors.

The deputation, on receiving this reply, immediately began to buckle on their armour. There wanted three days to the appointed time, and these three days were forthwith devoted to "getting up" their case. It was decided that besides the pastors of the respective flocks, the deputation should consist of Mr. Skeggs the tailor, Mr. Blodgett the tallow-chandler and Italian warehouseman, and Mr. Tottie the hairdresser, from the Little Hill; and Mr. Spray the auctioneer, Mr. Fogg the cabinetmaker, and Mr. Tuke the plumber and gasfitter, from Bethabara. The only member of the deputation who was acquainted with the Rector professionally was the gasfitter; for the Rector would no more have dreamt of buying his butter and cheese at a Dissenting shop, had there been a choice, than he would have invited a Dissenter to his table. It is true that he had once had his hair cut by Mr. Tottie, and very well cut too, if he had only had the candour to acknowledge it; but this irregularity was entirely due to the fact of the Church barber having been overtaken in a fault the night before, and pleading sickness rather than present himself before his clergyman with a contused nose.

"Now what I'm a-thinkin' is," said Mr. Fogg, "that in the step as we're about to take this afternoon, we should use our strength *merciful*." Mr. Fogg was entertaining the two ministers and the other members of the "deputation"

at a one-o'clock dinner on the momentous Thursday. He was a very tall, loose-jointed man, with a shock of dry, pale-brown hair falling untidily over one side of his forehead, a washed-out blue eye, and a weak and watery mouth. "What I think is as we should be merciful, you know," he repeated, with the persistence of a timid man who feels that his views are not popular. "This Mr. Tresham is a young man, and young men is easy led away from the simplicity o' the Gospel by the 'ereditary tendencies o' the age," concluded good Mr. Fogg, with mild complacency, feeling that he had made a point.

"I rayther agree wi' Brother Fogg," said Mr. Tottie, a little sharp, dry man, with a perfect Laocoon of glossy hair, culminating in a handsome 'Brutus.' Mr. Tottie's transient connection with Episcopalianism just referred to had given him rather a character for doctrinal laxity among the brethren with whom the Rector did not deal, and he was disposed just now to plume himself upon it as a sort of aristocratic distinction. "I think misself, Sir," he continued, turning to the Rev. Mr. Doom, "that young men as has been led away should be brought back with a crook, not a rod; they should be coaxed back, like,—drawed, not driven. My view is, not as we're a-going this afternoon to accuse Mr. Tresham, and get him reperrimanded by them as has the right to reperrimand him according to the constitootion

of the Church, but raythe to ask the Rector, as his spiritial father, to bring 'im round again, gentle. Many's the young man as has been driven into actial infidelity by too harsh measures, and our objeck should be to save 'im—if he's not gone too far."

"Take care—take care," said Mr. Skeggs the tailor, severely. "It seems to me there's many things besides all that as can be pushed too far—Christian charity, f'r instance. I look at it differently. We've got a plague-spot in our midst—a plague-spot. Let's have no mincing matters. We've got a young man come among us as don't preach the truth; as gets up in a pulpit and preaches agen Elijah, an' makes jokes about Balaam's ass, an' is 'and-in-glove wi' the Papists, an' is going to marry a young woman as don't belong to his church, or our church, or any church. All this is nothin' to us, you may say. I say, it is everything to us. Mr. Tresham was brought down here by Lady Sharp, and Lady Sharp's a member of our Little Hill, and ought to be responsible that he isn't an enemy to us and ours. He's drawed many sitters away from the cause, and from the cause at Bethabara, and from the parish church as well. Not as *that's* so much to the point, but still we mustn't forget it. Folks mayn't 'ave got much good sittin' under Mr. Fairweather, but still they got no harm. Now they do get harm under Mr. Tresham; and the thing's got to be stamped

out, Sir—stamped out, I take it, by we as watch for their souls as them as must give account."

"Let us not dispute, dear brethren," said Mr. Leech, with mild persuasiveness. "We all know that our dear sister Lady Sharp has suffered greatly through this unhappy young man. I heard myself, once"—here Mr. Leech coloured a little uncomfortably, as a reminiscence of the pickle-closet crossed his mind—"I have heard myself, once, that dear lady expostulate earnestly and affectionately with him; but he repulsed her admonitions with scoffs. I much fear that it must be said of him that he is joined to his idols. Then the Duchess came in, and the opportunity was lost. I'm sure I mourn over it. It is hard to see a soul going down to perdition with its eyes open. A godless woman, I fear, the Duchess. We must let the young man go his own way now; but the people—the poor, misguided people—they must be looked after."

"Far be it from me or any of us," chimed in Mr. Doom, in a heavy voice, "to attempt any interference with the eternal decrees of God. I don't know, *you* don't know, what is the eternal purpose of God with regard to this young man. He may be a chosen vessel, or he may be a vessel of wrath. We can only say one thing with any certainty: he is destined, as all creatures are, for the glorification of God; but whether through mercy or

through wrath, He only knows. Therefore, I say, let us not be presumptuous. We do not know whether this young man is elect or not. But we, blessed be God, *we* have made our election *sure*, and what we have to do is to look after the lambs of our own flock. That is our responsibility, and an awful one it is," concluded Mr. Doom, drinking a glass of very purple port in one slow, luxurious gulp.

"I have always feared that our Independent brother is at the bottom of the mischief," remarked Mr. Spray, the thriving auctioneer. "Talk about laxity! Why, I should be glad to know what his creed really is, if he has one at all. It's perfectly ridickalus, this pickin' about o' the Bible that some folks goes in for. Why, it's not logical; it don't hold together. Let a man take the Bible or leave the Bible, say I. But if he perfesses to believe as it's the Word o' God, and then goes pickin' out a bit here and puttin' in a bit there, and talkin' about degrees of inspiration, and one part having been stuck in by accident and another part left out by mistake, why I say he's either a fool or a knave. That's what folks tell me Mr. Insight does, and I believe, if the truth were known, you'd find it's him as has been leading Mr. Tresham astray. I quite agree with what Brother Leech here says, but I've a shrewd suspicion we've been puttin' too much on the one horse."

"Well, I don't know about Brother Insight," said Mr.

Fogg. "I remember hearing him preach once about unsettling the views of weak brethren, and he said it was one of the greatest sins a Christian could commit."

"I'm glad to hear as there's anything so robust in his creed as a belief in sin at all," replied Mr. Spray, somewhat snappishly.

"Some people seem to look upon a belief in sin as more important than belief in the grace o' God," spoke up Mr. Fogg, whose mild nature was rather shocked at these decided views.

"Come, come, brethren," murmured Mr. Leech. "Let us not be of two minds. We are all engaged in the same cause, and working for the same ends. Brother Fogg, have you the time? We musn't keep the Rector waiting."

"It wants five and twenty minutes to three," returned Mr. Fogg. "Dear me, I'd no idea it was so late. Mr. Doom, Sir, will you return thanks?"

This ceremony concluded, the company rose from table with rather anxious looks. It was now time to start, and a general hat-brushing took place. The two ministers each wore a pair of very old black kid gloves, much too large for them, and the rest of the brethren had assumed a sort of semi-Sunday garb, in deference, apparently, to the sacred character of their errand. They did not talk much as they went along the road, falling into twos and threes. The

business in hand was of a very important nature; but somehow it seemed a little vague and intangible when inspected closely. What was their grievance, put into so many words? and what did they want Mr. Fairweather to do? The questions were not such as could be answered in a moment, and before a solution had been arrived at they found themselves standing in the cool, dark, spacious drawing-room of the Rectory, awaiting the arrival of the Rector.

At last the door opened, and Mr. Fairweather walked in, looking rather flushed and pompous. The deputation bowed, most of them taking a little preliminary step to one side, rather in the manner taught by dancing-masters. "Mr.—a—Leech, I believe," said the Rector, with constrained civility, trying to look short-sighted. "And Mr.—a——"

"The Reverend Mr. Doom," said Mr. Leech, waving his hand toward that gentleman.

"And Mr. Tomb," concluded the Rector, in his husky voice. "Pray, gentlemen, be seated." This with a glance intended to include the lay members of the deputation. "I think you will find chairs enough." It is difficult to say whether this cutting sarcasm was understood. Then they all sat down, and the Rector waited in ponderous silence to hear what they had got to say.

"We have taken the liberty of calling upon you to-day, Sir," began Mr. Leech, "in order to invoke your assistance in a matter involving the interests of evangelical religion in this place." The Rector immediately thought they had come to make some complaints about the hydras at St. Gertrude's, but showed no signs of unbending so far. "Evangelical religion, you know, Sir," went on Mr. Leech, confidentially. "Now the Gospel has its enemies everywhere, and these are to be guarded against. We have the Man of Sin, the Popish superstition. And we have infidels,—men who scoff, and believe in nothing. These, Sir, are dangers we all know of. But, Sir, it is far worse when a man's foes are they of his own household. It is our painful duty, Sir, to bring before you the conduct of a clergyman of your own Church—conduct, Sir, which we fear is doing great and incalculable harm to the Gospel cause in Heathercombe. The Reverend Mr. Tresham, Sir"—here the Rector became all attention—"is, or was, a young man of great promise. He was brought among us by an elect lady whose devotion to the cause is well known. But it is to be feared that he is a stone of stumbling and rock of offence to many. His views are dangerously broad; indeed they are downright heretical. His specious manners and style of oratory—for the young man is not without gifts—have attracted many inconstant souls out of the way of truth. His friends are

not the friends of true religion. He has introduced Popery into the church, and infidelity into the pulpit. He——"

"What?" demanded the Rector. "Tresham preaching infidelity! Nonsense, nonsense. Come, now. How often have you heard him?"

"I, Sir?" answered Mr. Leech, taken a little aback. "Oh, I have never heard him. You forget, Mr. Fairweather, that I am a minister myself, and have my own flock to feed. But others have, and——"

"Others? Well, then, who?" interrupted the Rector, rather brusquely. "Mr. Tombs, for instance. Have you ever heard Mr. Tresham preach infidelity?"

"God forbid, Sir, that I should ever go inside his church," replied the Rev. Mr. Doom.

"Then which of you has?" asked the Rector, uncompromisingly. There was no reply. "What, no one? Come, there must be some mistake. I shall be obliged if some gentleman will give his own experience in the matter. Remember, it is a very serious charge, and can't be entertained on hearsay."

"It's the talk of the town, Sir," spoke up Mr. Skeggs, from one of the back-chairs.

"The talk of the town!" repeated the Rector. "And yet you've none of you taken the trouble to verify it! But go on. What else has Mr. Tresham done?"

"What hasn't he done, Sir?" began Mr. Doom, severely. "He is emptying all the houses of God in the place; he is misleading the youth; he is going after the gainsaying of Core, and——"

"The gainsaying of what?" said the Rector, with open eyes. "I am not quick at metaphor. Really I do not see the use of prolonging this conversation. If Mr. Tresham has been instrumental in decreasing the attendance at your chapels, I—well, I suppose I may say I regret it, if it annoys you; but I cannot help it. Besides, as a priest of the Established Church, you can scarcely expect me to interfere in the interests of Dissent. To speak plainly, you know I am bound to regard all preachers outside the Church of England as irregular and unauthorised. You are, in the Church's eye, schismatics—I use the word in no offensive sense—and, as such, it is an extraordinary thing for you to appeal to me against one of my brother clergy."

"Our preaching has been greatly owned, Sir, nevertheless," remarked Mr. Doom, with not unnatural warmth.

"Owned?" repeated the Rector, looking puzzled.

"If all as we hear is trew, Sir," said Mr. Fogg, "it is not only the chapels as is being affected injuriously. People say that the parish church is falling off as well; and in your own interests, Sir, it was hoped as you might be indooced to make common cause with us."

"The parish church, Sir, can very well take care of itself," almost shouted Mr. Fairweather, the hot colour suffusing his face. This was intolerable. "I do not feel inclined, Sir, to make common cause with anybody. I have nothing to do with Mr. Tresham, but still less to do with you. If his congregation don't like his doctrine or his practices, they have their remedy. Let them apply to the Bishop. That is their affair, and neither yours nor mine; and if you'll take a word of advice, you won't go and mix yourselves up with the matter at all."

"I think, dear Sir, you fail to grasp the situation," said Mr. Leech, persuasively, after a rather awkward pause. "Our object in addressing you to-day, as Brother Doom has said, is to ask your co-operation with us against a common danger. We hope that, upon consideration, you will see the advisability of remonstrating with our inexperienced and misguided young brother, not as his ecclesiastical superior so much as his friend and father in Christ. We see our flocks being allured from us by his specious eloquence. We see the cause of evangelical religion being endangered by his contemplated union with one who——"

"Heavens and earth, Sir," ejaculated the Rector, now losing patience, "do you want me to interfere with another man's love affairs? This is the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of. Why, bless my soul, the man's going to

marry one of your own denomination, isn't he? At least, a Dissenter of some sort; and instead of taking it as a compliment, you come here and urge it as a matter of complaint! The thing is unheard of. What have I to do with Mr. Tresham and his marriage?"

"May I ask, Sir, whether you know anything of the Rev. Mr. Insight and his daughter?" asked Mr. Blodgett, timidly.

"I do not," replied Mr. Fairweather.

"His orthodoxy is queer, Sir," resumed Mr. Blodgett; "the daughter is not what a minister's wife should be; and the connection is much spoken of and condemned among the brethren of all denominations."

"Then why don't the brethren of all denominations put a stop to it?" rejoined the Rector. "Really, gentlemen, you are putting a very unfair amount of responsibility upon my shoulders. What have I to do with it? Settle it among yourselves, pray; settle it among yourselves."

"And is that all the assistance you can give us, Mr. Fairweather?" asked Mr. Doom, picking up his hat with a solemn air.

"No," replied the Rector, rising. "I will give you a piece of advice. Your best plan will be to cure this Mr. Insight and his daughter of their heterodoxy first; when you have accomplished that, it will be time enough to come to me about Mr. Tresham. First pull the beam out of

the eye of your own people, then think about meddling with the mote of others. Or, if you find that too difficult, why not go and make your representations to Mr. Tresham himself? That would be the best way, it seems to me. But why you should come and scold me about it——"

"Scold *you*, Sir?" exclaimed little Mr. Tottie, excitedly. "No one would presoom to think of such a liberty. We've no cause o' complaint against you, Sir. You've never emptied our chapels," floundered the unfortunate hair-dresser, unconscious of his unflattering implication. "You've always let us alone; no one's ever left our connection for the parish church. The Dissenters all respecks you, Sir, for you never did them no harm that way. If all Church ministers was like you, Dissent 'ud grow and flourish. But Mr. Tresham, Sir, he's digging the ground from under our feet, and your feet, and the Lord only knows what it'll come to unless he's stopped somehow," concluded the little man, rubbing his hat the wrong way in the excitement of his peroration.

The iron entered deeply into the Rector's soul. He had contented himself with ignoring and despising his Dissenting brethren, and this was the result. What the good-hearted little barber said was only too true. He had actually been fostering schism—he, the strict Churchman, the chief pastor of the Church in Heathercombe; and he knew, only too

well, how many of the faithful he had been the means of losing to the parish church by his lofty sloth. The Rector coloured to the eyes, and made no answer.

"I thank you, Sir, for hearing us thus patiently," said Mr. Leech, at last. "You have given us a valuable lesson. We sinned in placing our reliance on an arm of flesh. I wish you good-day;" and the deputation filed solemnly out of the room. They had lost their cause; but the Rector had scarcely gained a victory, and felt that the only speaker who had scored at all was the man who had once cut his hair.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BLOW THREATENS.

SATURDAY came at last, and Eric packed his portmanteau with a feeling of intense relief at the prospect of leaving Heathercombe. The events of the week had thoroughly upset him. The fancied faithlessness of Naomi and the frantic behaviour of his mother had inflicted a sharp if not very deep wound, and he longed to be where he could forget his troubles and enjoy himself in congenial society. And now, on this the day of his departure, his proceedings were characterised by an air of mystery which did not usually mark the doings of that candid youth. He insisted on Edith keeping an engagement she had previously made to spend the afternoon with Beatrice Heath, saying that he would be gone by the time she came back. He accepted no assistance in packing, but crammed as many things into his portmanteau as he could make it hold, and sent it down to the station at half-past four o'clock, though his train did not leave till seven. His mother's refusal to see him relieved him of the embarrassment of taking a personal farewell, and

he left the house at a quarter to five,—just two hours before he need have started to catch the train.

A curious scene, meanwhile, was being enacted at Mr. Insight's. The minister had observed for some days previously an unusual flightiness in Naomi's demeanour, which caused him some perplexity. She had been exuberantly gay one minute, and as strangely depressed the next. A feverish excitement seemed to possess her, alternating with a stolid calm, and even sullenness, for which there seemed to be no predisposing cause. It so happened that, a day or two before, Tresham had laughingly proposed to her that she should anticipate her duties as a parson's wife by working some piece of embroidery for his chancel. Naomi had assented rather vaguely, and on the Saturday in question her father asked her whether she had begun her work. In an instant her face, which a moment before had been pale and calm, became suffused with a hot glow, and she replied somewhat carelessly that she had not.

"But don't you think you had better, my dear?" said Mr. Insight, smiling at her through his spectacles.

"Do *you* think so?" was her unexpected reply.

"Certainly, my dear, since you have promised," rejoined Mr. Insight, wondering what was to come next. "You have not repented of your task, surely. Come, now; it will be something for you to do this afternoon."

"I can't bear needlework," said Naomi, discontentedly. "I'd rather dust all your old books—there!"

"Dust my old books, indeed," laughed the minister. "No, no; I don't trust anybody to meddle with my old books. Besides, you promised Arthur, you know. For his sake you should make an effort."

"I've made efforts enough lately, of one sort and another," replied Naomi. "I wish people would leave me in peace a little while."

"If it's a real effort for you to perform a trifling service for the man you are going to marry, there must be something seriously wrong somewhere," said Mr. Insight, more sternly. "I cannot suppose you wish to speak slightingly of him,—still less that you feel your relation to him an irksome one; either would be too terrible. But I have not your confidence, Naomi, and am consequently driven to surmise respecting matters where I think I have a natural right to meet with spontaneous frankness."

"La, father, what a deal you do make of a trifle!" said Naomi. "Arthur isn't a baby, that he's likely to cry because I haven't embroidered a book-mark for him, or such trumpery. I dare say he's forgotten he asked me, by this time. Besides, he'll have me, body and soul, some day, and it'll be time enough then for me to serve him for my keep."

"Serve him for your keep!" cried the old minister, in a

torrent of indignation and disgust. "Am I not justified in decrying this marriage, when you can use such shocking words in respect of so kind a man? I trust—I do most earnestly trust—you never forget yourself in this way when you are with him. He would be deeply pained. He has given you so much; can you not give him anything in return? Must you insult the very tenderness he lavishes upon you by such words as you have just spoken?"

"He takes me with his eyes open," said Naomi, in a sullen tone. "I don't pretend to be perfect, but I daresay we shall get along well enough. We've never fallen out yet, at any rate."

"But are you happy?" said Mr. Insight,—"as happy as a girl in your position ought to be?"

"I'm not particularly *un*happy," was Naomi's reply. "I'm nervous, I suppose; the least thing upsets me. It'll be all right when we're married and settled down."

"God grant it may be," said Mr. Insight, very seriously. "You have given me great anxiety—great anxiety—for some time past, Naomi; and that anxiety has been much aggravated by your refusal to place any confidence in me whatever. It needs no prophet's eye, Naomi, to see that you are hiding something from me; but what it is I know not. Are you ill? Are you in any trouble? Can't you, or won't you tell me? What is it, Naomi, that has come between us?"

"Nothing, father; nothing that I know of," replied Naomi, rather overawed by this direct appeal. "I'm well enough. There's no cause to worry."

"Well? In body you may be, and I trust you are; but in mind? Are you happy, or do you shrink from the step you are so soon about to take?"

"It matters very little whether I shrink or not," replied Naomi. "I have decided to take it, and I believe it will be for the best. Of course I haven't the gift of foresight. It may prove a horrible mistake. It was that uncertainty that made me advise Arthur not to press his suit when he asked me. But he wouldn't listen to me, and for good or ill we are now engaged to be married."

Mr. Insight sighed. It was discouraging work, this appealing to a girl who evaded everything he said. What could he do if she simply refused to enlighten him about her state of mind? The more he thought over it, the greater reason he had to feel that he had been right in discouraging the match; and yet, now that it was to take place, was there not something terrifying in the thought that Tresham was really going to the altar blindfold—that he was marrying a girl who enveloped herself in a cloud of mystery or caprice, and who had certainly never given any proof whatever that she really cared for him? Well, he would try once more.

"Naomi," he said, crossing his legs, and grasping an old paper-knife firmly in one hand, "you need say no more to convince me that you are hiding something from me. So much you have unwittingly revealed; and if you refuse to tell me what that something is, I have no means of forcing you. I will only ask you one more question. What was your reason for accepting Mr. Tresham's proposals?"

"My reason?" repeated Naomi, rather taken aback.

"Yes, your reason," replied her father, with increasing firmness. "You say yourself you 'advised' him not to press his suit. You only accepted him when he would take no denial. You have never shown, at any rate, any great proofs of love for him; yet you nearly fainted the other day because he told you he couldn't marry you immediately, and now you talk of the time when you will be his wife in a way that has shocked me beyond measure. All these facts are, on the face of it, incompatible with each other, and force me to the conclusion I have already expressed—that you are hiding something from me. Now you must have had some reason, other than Mr. Tresham's urgency, for deciding as you have done. What is that reason?"

"I might quite as well ask you why you set your face so much against the affair from the first, father," retorted Naomi, with spirit. "What was *your* reason for urging him to think better of it, and telling him you'd be glad if

the marriage never came off at all? If you ask me why I accepted Arthur Tresham, I think he has at least an equal right to ask you why you opposed his offer."

"How do you know he has not done so, and that I have not given him my answer?" replied Mr. Insight, a slight colour mounting to his brow. "I opposed his offer because I deemed the match unsuitable; unsuitable—shall I confess it?—for his sake. But when I saw that his happiness was bound up in my consent, I withdrew all active antagonism, and contented myself with a protest and a warning. Since then, I have hoped much from the influence upon your character of a true man's love, of a home of your own, of wifehood, and perchance of motherhood. The man's love you have now enjoyed for weeks; and what is your state of mind to-day? And what probability is there that those other blessings which lie in store for you will have the desired result when the greatest of all has failed?"

"Perhaps you'd like the match to be broken off after all," exclaimed his daughter, bitterly. "If so, you'll have to deal with him—not with me."

"There is no question of breaking off the match," replied Mr. Insight, with marvellous self-command. "My only desire is for the highest good of you both; and my anxiety arises from your own inconsequent and strange

behaviour, which is not that of a happy and contented bride-elect. This behaviour you consistently refuse to explain; and I therefore ask, as a last resource, why you accepted Arthur Tresham when he asked you to be his wife?"

"Supposing I were to say that of two evils I chose the less?" said Naomi, defiantly.

"Evils!" exclaimed Mr. Insight, with something like a moan of pain; "an evil to marry a man who loves you—a greater evil to live with me? May God forgive you, you ungrateful child!"

"Oh, father," cried Naomi, starting up, "I didn't mean that. Why do you always take me up so seriously? It is dull here, certainly; but, oh! I never meant to say it was an evil to be with you! Father, you may believe me or not as you like; but some day, perhaps, you will know for yourself that whatever I called an evil it was not that. Don't ask me any more, dear, just at present. You've been pushing me rather hard, you know. Don't all girls consider it an evil to grow into old maids? And don't some choose what they call the lesser evil of marrying in order to prevent it? I don't say that's my case," she continued, with an attempt at gaiety. "I'm really fond of Arthur, in spite of the awkward things I say and do; and you know I love you, don't you?"

"It would kill me if I believed otherwise, my dear,"

replied old Insight, with a brave smile; though a tear was in his eye, nevertheless.

"There!" said Naomi; "now let's forget all about it. I'll begin Arthur's needlework; it'll be something to occupy me, at any rate. I'll go out and get the silk at once. The walk will do me good, I dare say."

Then she gave the old man a light kiss on the forehead, and Mr. Insight heard her steps ascending the creaky little staircase. She seemed a long time dressing. A great silence fell upon the house, broken only by Naomi's foot-falls in the room above as she made preparations for her walk. It was nearly an hour before she came down again. "Good-bye, father!" she cried as she passed the slightly-open door. The words startled Mr. Insight strangely; he rose in his chair to speak to her, but she was out of the house before he had well got upon his feet, and was walking rapidly towards the town.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BLOW FALLS.

Tresham, as may be supposed, was happily quite unconscious of the battle of which he had been the subject in the Rector's drawing-room. Among the defects of this young man's character—and he had not a few—was an almost absolute disregard of what other people thought of him. It never occurred to him to wonder whether he was popular or not in Heathercombe, and while he would have been more or less than human had he felt no pain at the unprovoked and unreasonable hostility of his patroness, it cannot be said that the wound rankled very deep. He was conscious, of course, that he occupied a somewhat isolated position among his fellow-ministers in the town. He was not identified with any existing school of thought, while he was in distinct opposition to many of the most prominent. But this did not grieve him. He felt that he was liked by his congregation, and that he was doing a definite and useful work; things were prosperous enough upon the whole, and

he only wanted now to get safely married to settle down to an even wider career of usefulness and labour.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening of the Saturday of which we have been writing. Tresham had finished his sermons for next day, and was just lighting a cheroot at the open window, outside which lay the little garden, shrouded in the darkness of the night. It was very peaceful, very sweet. Life was flowing smoothly with the young man, and he felt happy and strong in his happiness, as he sat upon the window-sill with the balmy evening air fanning his brow. Suddenly the bell pealed sharply, wildly, through the house. Tresham started out of his reverie and listened. He heard the summons answered, and hasty, noisy steps approaching the room. Then the door was burst open without ceremony, and the face of Mr. Insight, pale and terror-stricken, appeared before him.

"Where's Naomi?" gasped this apparition, breathlessly.

"Naomi?" echoed Tresham, in amazement. "Why, what's wrong with her?"

"She's gone," said Mr. Insight, as he sank into a chair.

"Gone!" repeated the young man. "Gone where?"

"God only knows," was the reply. "She left my house this afternoon before five o'clock, and has not been heard of since."

Tresham turned cold from head to foot. The blow had

struck him dumb. It was a dreadful moment. "God help us!" he uttered at last. Then springing up, he said, "Let us go in search of her at once."

"My poor fellow, I have been seeking her for the last two hours," said Mr. Insight, hopelessly.

"Come, come, come!" cried Tresham, almost furiously. "She can't be lost; people don't disappear from the earth without leaving any trace behind. I'll not leave a clod unturned. She may have missed her way, or been taken ill, or"—— Then he stopped, as the futility of his suggestions seemed to strike him bitterly. He seized his hat, and, fearing they knew not what, the two went out together.

Sick at heart, they ranged the streets—up and down, to and fro, this way and that. The police-station was the first place they went to, and of course learned nothing there. Nor had she been seen at the railway-station. There were other places they did not dare to speak of. A certain deep pool, which lay under a thick, big hedge in a meadow; the quickly rushing river, which flowed darkly past its banks under the rustic bridge at the end of Jordan Lane. During their walk, Mr. Insight detailed to Tresham the conversation he had held with the missing girl that afternoon, and the circumstances of her going out; and of course each man bitterly reproached himself with the part that he had played. Tresham wished he had never asked her to do anything at

all, as though his simple suggestion that she should work a bit of embroidery for him had led to her disappearance; but his was not a nature to reason sensibly when under the pressure of an intense anxiety. Mr. Insight was less demonstrative. He yearned towards his unhappy child, and told himself a thousand times that he might have been tenderer and kinder to her; brushed away a tear or two, and prayed silently that his reason might be preserved. Then a cruel aggravation of their misery struck them both. There were the Sunday's services to be provided for. It was impossible that either of them should stand up in his pulpit the next day and face his congregation with that awful sorrow and anxiety hidden away in his heart. It was necessary, however, that whatever arrangements were to be made should be made at once, and Tresham accordingly sent a note to the Rector, saying that a sudden trouble had unnerved him, and begging that he would permit one of his curates to take the duty at the district church next day. This brought a kind and sympathising reply, promising Tresham that the help should be forthcoming. Poor Mr. Insight was too much crushed to take any action on his own behalf at all; nor, indeed, could he have made arrangements in any case, seeing that there were no available ministers in the town.

By ten o'clock next morning everybody in the connection

knew of the strange disappearance of Naomi; and the sensation which ensued was great. Some said that the girl had committed suicide through being forced into an obnoxious marriage. Others averred that her father had driven her out of the house; others, again, said that she had always been a badly-disposed girl, and that she had simply gone off. The chapel was shut up; and then it became gradually whispered about that the minister, overcome by the shock of his daughter's disappearance, had had a "stroke." This report proved, alas! too true. The servant who brought him his shaving-water in the morning found him lying with his face drawn, speechless and helpless, crosswise upon his bed. Dr. Urquhart was sent for, and pronounced the old man to be suffering from an attack of paralysis, brought on by intense nervous agitation. It was, however, not severe, and there was every hope of the patient rallying before long, with care and attention. But of the best remedy of all—the return of his hapless daughter—there seemed as yet no signs.

The first thing Tresham did on hearing of Mr. Insight's seizure was to post off to St. Gertrude's, and procure the services of a Sister of Mercy from the convent connected with that institution. In this he experienced no difficulty, and by twelve o'clock a black-robed, white-hooded, calm-faced woman was moving noiselessly about the sick man's

room, and ministering to the comfort of the patient with infinitely greater kindliness than he had ever experienced from the missing girl. Having thus provided for immediate necessities, Tresham took the two p.m. train to Westhampton, and placed the whole affair in the hands of the detectives, who accepted the responsibility with cheerful confidence. They had not the slightest doubt that the young lady would be soon discovered, always supposing that she was neither dead nor gone to London; in either of which cases, of course, she would be beyond the reach of Westhampton ingenuity. But supposing that she was alive and in the county, Mr. Tresham, they assured him, might go home again with a light heart.

Tresham went home again, but his heart was heavy enough. The sharpness of the blow had not passed off. He felt dazed, bewildered, horrified, as though under the influence of some distressing nightmare. It was nearly eleven o'clock on that dreadful Sunday evening as he found himself walking once more through the streets of Heathercombe on the way from the station to his lonely lodgings, and his thoughts were very bitter. The future seemed suddenly to have become as dark as that moonless night. Mr. Insight, he thought, would probably die; and it appeared to Tresham that, under the circumstances, that would be the most merciful thing that could happen. Strangely

enough, in spite of all his energy in endeavouring to trace Naomi, he felt a secret conviction or presentiment that he would never see her again. Her disappearance would add one to the many mysteries which had never been explained. There were many such mysteries on record — murders, suicides, and alas! disappearances. A dreadful story came into his mind about a barrister, who, coming home to dinner one evening, found that his wife had gone out shopping that afternoon and had not returned. He waited half an hour for her, and then sat down alone. Did he ever see her again? Yes, fifteen years afterwards, in the shape of a convict, who had been brought out of prison to give evidence against a burglar; and then she denied him to his face. Was this to be *his* fate? Was Naomi——

The horror grew insupportable. He stumbled up the staircase to his room; and, muttering a prayer for strength, flung himself, dressed as he was, upon the bed, where he lay tossing restlessly till daybreak.

CHAPTER XIX.

MISS ASHE EXPLAINS IT ALL.

"SEE, now, my dear brother, the rebuke that has fallen upon us from the Lord," said the Rev. Mr. Doom, as he entered Mr. Leech's study on Monday morning, prepared for a refreshing conversation. "How blind, how faithless, has our conduct been in regard to this unhappy young man! Why could we not have left him in the Lord's hands? Might we not have known that He would avenge His own cause?"

"Most true indeed," replied Mr. Leech, with complacent fervour. "It was the Lord who spoke to us by the mouth of the Rector when he told us to mind our own affairs. Vengeance is His, and He will assuredly repay."

"Let it be a lesson to us for the future," groaned Mr. Doom, who had seldom experienced more profound enjoyment than from the trouble that had fallen upon Tresham and the Independent minister. "Has anything been heard of the missing girl?"

"Nothing whatever that I know of," replied Mr. Leech, with lugubrious satisfaction.

"His ways are past finding out," said Mr. Doom. "I dare say she will never be discovered. Poor lost soul! It is a heavy judgment on her father. What does his learning avail him now? Will it bring him back his daughter? Will it soothe his bed of languishing?"

Mr. Leech shook his head pityingly.

"Ah!" groaned Mr. Doom once more, "thus it is with all who trust in themselves and despise others. And what does our Sister Sharp think about it all?"

"The Lord support her!" ejaculated Mr. Leech. "Our dear sister is being sorely tried just now in her own children. I know not even whether she has heard of the sad business we are speaking of. Her son has gone away—left his mother's roof to enjoy the pleasures of sin in town—and her daughter, alas! is of little comfort to her. I was thinking of walking up to the Hall—er—shortly before dinner-time, to inquire for her health."

Mr. Doom would have given his pulpit-cushion to be allowed to accompany his friend, but had not the courage to propose it. Much refreshed, however, by the interview, he shortly took his leave, exacting a cheerful promise from Mr. Leech to allay his anxiety about their dear sister as soon as they should meet again; while Mr. Leech brushed his coat and hat, pocketed a large Bible, and prepared himself generally for his visit. It was a sunshiny, genial day in

September, and the minister proceeded leisurely along the road which led to Brookfield Hall. It was not part of his plan to arrive too early. Lady Sharp dined punctually at half-past one, and it was not much after eleven when Mr. Leech started from his own door. He went down the High Street, smiling benignly upon his acquaintances, and then turned up Market Street, which led to the country-road where Brookfield Hall was situated. He had not got far, however, before a rustle of skirts was heard behind him, accompanied by an impatient panting sound, as of a lady somewhat out of breath. Looking round, he found himself confronted, to his great astonishment, by Miss Ashe.

"I thought I should *never* catch you!" gasped that lady, as she shook hands with the startled minister. "Here's a pretty business! To think that it should have come to this! Not that it's any surprise to *me*. Oh dear, no! Why, I've seen through it all along. *I* know all about it, and I'm only surprised they didn't do it weeks and months ago."

"It is indeed a shocking affair," replied Mr. Leech. "I presume you are referring to the disappearance of Miss Insight. But what do you mean by saying you knew all about it? And who are 'they'?"

"What!" cried Miss Ashe, with delighted eagerness; "do you mean to say you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?" asked Mr. Leech. "I have heard, indeed—as who has not?—of the mysterious disappearance of the poor young lady; but I know nothing more—nothing."

"Do you mean to say you don't know who she's gone off with?" said the lady, her bonnet-strings quivering with excitement.

"Gone off with?" cried the minister, honestly startled and shocked. "My dear, dear lady! This is terrible. Such a possibility never occurred to me before. Are you sure of what you are saying?"

"Sure? It isn't a question of being sure," rejoined Miss Ashe, with a portentous leer. "It's a question of knowing; it's a question of hearing; it's a question of seeing. You look to me as if you were going up to the Hall, Mr. Leech," continued the excited woman, as she gradually approached the climax of her communication; "and if you are, it's just as well that you should know the truth. She's run away with Eric Charteris!"

Mr. Leech turned crimson with astonishment. "Run away with Eric Charteris?" he repeated, mechanically. "Run away with the son of Lady Sharp? Do you know what you're saying, Miss Ashe?"

"It's as true as gospel," replied Miss Ashe, delighted at the sensation she was producing. "Two and two make four,

and I defy the world to prove they don't. The whole thing was arranged at the Duke of Grandchester's ball; I heard it all myself. 'On Saturday evening at five;' those were Naomi's own words, and she was speaking to Mr. Charteris. If that wasn't an appointment, I should like to know what is. And what follows? Young Charteris leaves his mother's 'ouse at five, and goes up to London; Naomi leaves her father's 'ouse at five, and doesn't appear again. What do you say? No trace of her at the station? What was there to prevent her walking to the *next* station, and getting in there? Yah! Don't tell me."

Poor Mr. Leech had no intention of telling her anything, or indeed of saying anything to her at all. The affair looked very black, and there appeared every reason to place faith in the version given of it by Miss Ashe. Naomi had never pretended to be much in love with Tresham, whereas her flirtations with Eric were carried on in the most public manner. Nor was she likely to have been attracted by the prospect of settling down as a country clergywoman, but, on the contrary, had shown signs of uneasiness for some weeks. On the other hand, Eric was on bad terms with his mother, and there had been painful scenes between them. Lady Sharp had almost cursed him, and Eric had fled in horrified anger from the house. Nothing was more likely than that a hot-tempered, unregenerate youth should

crown his wickedness to God with an act calculated to bring disgrace upon his mother. "Miserable, wretched boy!" groaned the minister, though his grief was not entirely unalleviated. "I must go at once and break the awful news to our dear sister. Ah! how sadly she will need support!"

So saying, Mr. Leech turned briskly upon his heel, and, forgetful of his wonted courtesy, started off in the direction of Brookfield Hall without so much as taking leave of his companion. That energetic lady, however, had no intention of letting him off so easily. Adjusting her spectacles, and gathering up her alpaca skirts, she stepped smartly along by his side, talking volubly as she went. The minister felt somewhat annoyed; he had no intention whatever of allowing Miss Ashe to accompany him upon his visit, and his desire to shake her off, together with the preoccupation caused by the news he had just heard, imparted a certain *brusquerie* to the few words he found himself forced to say.

"I really quite sympathise with you, Mr. Leech; I do indeed," said Miss Ashe, effusively. "You have such a shockingly painful duty before you. But of course, as a minister of the Gospel, you must often have a great deal to do in the way of making disagreeable announcements to people. I should never have the courage for it, if I had to, I'm sure."

"I dare say not," said Mr. Leech, briefly.

"Poor dear Lady Sharp!" continued Miss Ashe. "My heart quite bleeds for her. Such a fine young man, too; so clever and full of promise. I never liked that Naomi; she was always a designing thing. But then, as I said to the Duchess, *what* can one expect? I'm sure *I* don't know; and so there you are, you see."

"Ah!" said Mr. Leech, too deep in thought to pay much attention to the ambiguous outpourings of the irrepressible person beside him.

"I knew you'd agree with me," said Miss Ashe, with modest triumph. "Do you know, I can't help thinking I can see my way through a brick wall as clearly as most people; so many people agree with me whenever I venture to express an opinion. Of course, I'm not proud; but still, one can't help feeling a little satisfaction, you know; it's a tribute to one's common-sense."

"A very blessed gift is common-sense," murmured the minister, abstractedly.

"I'm sure," continued Miss Ashe, "I've been perfectly astonished at those two's goings on. Why, anybody could see with 'alf an eye they 'ad an understanding between 'em. There's young Mr. Charteris going to the chapel of a Sunday evening, walking home with the girl before even the minister was out o' the vestry, and laughin' away down the street in

a style that was positively improper. Does anybody suppose he went to chapel to listen to the sermon? And then, what with whisperings, and glances, and appointments, and I don't know what all, why, the whole thing has been a regular scandal. Of course, the father's not so much to blame. What can an old bookworm like that do with a sly creature bent on mischief? Don't tell me. I saw it weeks ago, and now it's come to pass."

"I hope, Miss Ashe, that so terrible a warning will be blessed to all of us," observed Mr. Leech, goaded by an intense desire to snub his talkative companion. "'Let him that thinketh he standeth——' you know the rest, of course."

"Well, I'm sure!" exclaimed the lady, bridling. "Really, Sir, I should *not* 'ave expected such a remark from you, of all people. Of course with the Duchess it is different. It amuses her Grace to twit me, in a good-natured way, every now and then; but even *she* never presumed to warn me against elopements. The Duchess has rallied me on certain attentions paid me by a gentleman I will *not* name; though such attentions were always strictly honourable, Sir, and he *never* 'ad any encouragement from *me*. I 'ave every respect for the Scriptures, but do *not* think my conduct 'as been such as to warrant any man, even a minister, in using them to warn me not to imitate Miss Insight."

Miss Ashe's cheeks were red, and her spectacles flashed

angrily; but she was not really angry. On the contrary, she was charmed. No woman in the world was less likely to be tempted to elope with anybody than Miss Ashe; so venturesome a spirit as that required for the enterprise was not to be found in man; but she did not fully realise that fact, and it was delightful to be told that, positively, she too must be upon her guard. Nothing, however, had been further from the intention of Mr. Leech than to pay her so stupendous a compliment, even in the guise of a reproof.

"My good lady," said the harassed minister, "I intended no such implication. The Lord forbid that I should accuse a discreet woman of your years with a lightness in her walk and conversation. Pray," he continued, as Miss Ashe's ruddy face betrayed signs of real mortification and disappointment at these disconcerting words, "pray, do not let me take you farther out of your way. You have been the bearer of startling news, and I must ponder it prayerfully alone. No, not another step, I beg. Good-morning, ma'am—good-morning."

So saying he gave her hand a very decided shake, and marched off with rapid steps. Poor Miss Ashe found herself got rid of in a fashion but little flattering to her *amour propre*, and for some moments stood, indignant and confused, on the spot where the minister had left her. She soon recovered herself, however, and gathering up her skirts

again, began to tramp back townwards, in quest of fresh adventures. Not for months had she experienced such a pleasurable sensation of importance. Here was a whole town bent on the elucidation of a most delightful mystery, and she was in possession of the key to it! If only she could ferret out some valuable piece of corroborative evidence—but how? Well, that would come in time, no doubt; news engenders news, and the best plan to get more would be to circulate what she had already with all the industry in her power.

It was not surprising, then, that long before the pleasant sunshine disappeared on that September day, the fact that Eric Charteris had run away with Naomi Insight was generally believed in Heathercombe; and the sensation caused by this announcement was intensified when an errand-boy in the employ of Mr. Blodgett, the eminent tallow-chandler and Italian warehouseman, stated that he had seen the guilty pair walking in a lane not far from the railway-station between six and seven o'clock on Saturday evening. This was of course held to clinch the whole affair; and it is but just to state that the very heartiest sympathy was felt for Tresham at having been the victim of so singularly base a piece of treachery. And yet, curiously enough, no hint to this effect had hitherto reached Tresham. He had locked himself up in his study the whole day, and sat eating his heart out in

sickening expectation of tidings that never came, morbidly shrinking from the sight of every human creature. It was not till dusk that he roused himself, and prepared to go round and see his fellow-sufferer.

"How is he?" asked the young man in a whisper, as he entered the darkened room.

"*Il va bien, il va bien,*" replied the Sister, with a quiet smile.

"*Vous ne parlez pas anglais, ma Sœur?*" asked Tresham, somewhat anxiously.

"*Pas un mot,*" said the Sister, shaking her head. "*Je suis Belge.*"

Here was a pretty state of things, thought Tresham. What on earth would be the use of a nurse to whom the patient could not convey his wants?—for poor Mr. Insight, he well knew, was no French scholar. As a matter of fact, however, it was not of any great importance, for at present he was deprived of the power of speech in any language, and all he required was skilful nursing. Tresham bent over him and smiled. The poor minister's attempt to smile back produced an effect ghastly enough to make his visitor feel sick; still his condition was by no means hopeless, and there was a chance of his recovering his powers sufficiently to make himself understood within a reasonable distance of time. Such, at any rate, was the opinion of Dr. Urquhart,

who had refused to view the case seriously from the very first.

Just as these thoughts were passing through Tresham's mind, the doctor himself entered, and shook hands with him warmly. Tresham felt his presence a relief. However wretched a man may be, there is always comfort in the sympathy and friendship of a stronger, better-balanced nature than his own; and at the present moment there was absolutely no one else at hand to whom he could turn for help. Dr. Urquhart examined the sick man for a few minutes, and then held a whispered colloquy with the nurse in French.

"How do you find him?" asked Tresham, as the doctor walked towards the place where he was waiting.

"He'll do very well," replied Urquhart. "The stroke was a very light one. With care and nourishment he'll be able to use his tongue in a few days, I trust."

"I like the look of the nurse," remarked Tresham. "By the way, do you suppose she has any idea—I mean, of what brought on his illness?"

"Not a bit of it," said the doctor. "They never hear any gossip at St. Gertrude's, least of all the Sisters; and this one, as you see, doesn't understand a word of English. By the bye, she's just been telling me that there are some things at the convent she left behind in her hurry, and

she says she must have them to-night. She can't leave, of course, and——"

"I'll go for them," said Tresham, quickly. "A walk in the dark would do me good. Let her write a note, and I will carry it for her."

"That's very good of you," said Urquhart. "And I don't think the walk would do you any harm either. Can you start at once?"

"This moment," replied Tresham. The doctor thereupon informed the sister that *le jeune révérend* would be happy to do her errand, and the Sister, with a quiet smile of thanks, wrote the necessary letter and entrusted it to Tresham's care. Mr. Insight, meanwhile, had fallen into a quiet sleep. The next moment Tresham found himself out of doors, under the starshine, alone once more with his misery.

Yes, he was miserable, and yet he almost enjoyed the walk. The exercise, the stillness, and the pure fresh air were all a great relief to him after the confinement of the day. He had been quite right in thinking that the walk would do him good; it soothed his spirits inexpressibly, and seemed to brace him for the struggles yet to be undergone. For it was clear that, unless Naomi reappeared soon, the sorrows in store for him were infinitely greater than the actual shock he had already sustained. The long, dreary

days and months that lay before him, dark with what would be the great grief and mystery of his life, were an appalling prospect in the eyes of the young man. It was but a few hours ago that this terrible blight had fallen upon him, putting out all his joy; yet what an age it seemed! It was as though years had passed over his head since then.

A brisk walk soon brought him to the gate of St. Gertrude's Oratory. He gave the Sister's note to the porter for delivery, saying that he would take back any answer there might be; and then walked round to the quarters inhabited by Giraldi. There was a light inside, and the sound of some one moving. He knocked.

A pause. The sound ceased, but for a moment there was no reply. Then Tresham knocked again.

"Who's there?" said Giraldi's voice within.

"It is I—Tresham," replied he.

Then the door was rather slowly opened, and Giraldi appeared, with an expression on his face that Tresham put down for surprise, but which was certainly tempered with a dash—a slight dash—of unmistakable annoyance. "Tresham!" he exclaimed, "why, this is quite unexpected. I certainly never thought of seeing you here to-night. Have you walked out?"

"I'll not trouble you many minutes," replied Tresham. "I came out to procure something for the Sister who is

attending Mr. Insight; she can't leave him, so sent a note by me. They'll bring me the answer here."

"Sit down," said Giraldi, dragging up an easy-chair. "You're not looking well. Is anything the matter?"

"Matter!" echoed Tresham; "do you mean to say that you've heard nothing—that you don't know the misery that has come upon us all?"

"I've heard nothing whatever," replied Giraldi. "What is it?"

"Just this, that Miss Insight — you knew her, I think —has disappeared; and her father lies struck down by paralysis." It was difficult work for Tresham to get this out.

"But when—when did this occur?" inquired Giraldi.

Tresham told him the circumstances briefly, adding that the affair was now in the hands of the detectives.

"It is very mysterious indeed," said Giraldi, when the recital was finished; "very mysterious and shocking. Still I can't believe that anything really dreadful has happened to her. I mean, you've no reason at present to suppose she is not alive. What did the detectives say about it?"

"They weren't in a position to say much," replied Tresham. "When I saw them yesterday afternoon, of course they had no particulars to go upon; and I haven't heard from them since. The suspense is something fearful to me."

"Is there nothing to suggest whether she has gone anywhere of her own free will, or has been——"

"Been what?" asked Tresham, as Giraldi hesitated.

"Been kidnapped, I was going to say, or misled in some way," finished Giraldi. "Such things have occurred, you know; and mysteries which at first seemed inexplicable have been solved in the simplest fashion. But of course I am only guessing."

"Who would kidnap her?" replied Tresham, shaking his head. "The mystery is dark enough, God knows; but I don't believe in that solution of it. We must just wait, I suppose. It's a bitter trial; I can only pray that the days of it may be shortened, for all our sakes."

Here there was a knock at the door, and a servant entered bearing a small parcel. "The Lady Superior's compliments. Would the gentleman be kind enough to charge himself with it for Sister Philomène? She required it that night."

Tresham took the packet and prepared to leave Giraldi. How curiously apathetic the lad seemed! One would have thought his warm Spanish blood would have been roused to something like excitement by the story he had just heard. But his demeanour and expression had continued calm and cool throughout; there was a watchfulness in his eyes, too, and a measuredness in his way of speaking,

which, Tresham thought, contrasted very peculiarly with his usual impulsive tone. But what could one expect of a youth who was living under the repressive influences of a semi-monastic life? What should he know of disappointed love, of baffled passion? How could he sympathise with feelings his only knowledge of which was theoretical?

So pondered Tresham as he retraced his steps along the silent country-road. He walked quickly, partly because he knew that Sister Philomène was in need of the packet he carried, and partly because his nerves felt again miserably unstrung. He started at every rustle of the leaves, and every horrible story he had ever heard of wraiths and apparitions came back upon his recollection and filled him with unearthly terrors. Naomi's wraith! Was she dead, and was that her solemn ghost come to tell him where to search for her cold body? No; only an opening between the trees, showing a patch of pale and livid sky. His heart beat fast, and the drops of moisture stood upon his forehead. Never had he felt so thoroughly unhinged before. He would have been ashamed of himself, had he not been too wretched to care whether he was a fool or not.

He got back to the minister's cottage about half-past ten, and gave the nurse her parcel. Mr. Insight was still asleep and doing well. Then he went home.

On his hall-table he found a letter, addressed in a hand-

writing he did not know. How is it that some of the most terrible events of life come to us in a guise so grotesque and ludicrous as to make us feel inclined to laugh at the very moment when our hearts are about to break? Is it because sorrow is not sorrowful enough that a spice of the ridiculous must be added to it in order to make it ghastly? This is what Tresham read :—

"If Mr. T. is anxious to find a certain *young person*, let him inquire who she was last seen with, a friend of Mr. T.'s went to town by the seven train on Saturday, *did he go alone?* The writer knows he *didn't*, she heard an *assignation* made between them only the other day, it was quite unmistakable, though didn't know all it meant. This hint is from a humble but sincere, ADMIRER.

"*Monday.*"

CHAPTER XX.

DR. URQUHART'S VIEWS.

THE receipt of so extraordinary and disquieting a communication as that from his "Admirer" did not conduce to Tresham's repose that night. The insinuation it contained was very terrible to him; for of course there could be no question as to the identity of the individual referred to. That Eric Charteris, his friend, his former schoolfellow, should have been guilty of so foul a crime, seemed to him, at first, incredible. He had always regarded Eric as the frankest, the most transparently honest, the most simple-minded fellow in the whole world. No one had a keener sense of honour; with all his faults and follies, no one was a truer gentleman at heart than Eric Charteris. But if this shocking accusation were true, there was an end of everything. There was no more confidence possible in either man or woman. Naomi false! Eric a traitor! Could it be so in very truth? Was this the solution of the mystery?

He looked haggard enough next morning, when, having

risen from his sleepless bed, he sat down mechanically to breakfast. The sight of food was loathsome to him. Still, he had something to decide—which, so far, was a good thing; it gave him something to think about. Should he communicate with Eric? This was a knotty point, on which he found it difficult to make up his mind. His first impulse had been to telegraph to him. His second idea was to write to him, and tell him the facts of the case. He now doubted whether either course was wise; and, as he hesitated and wavered, wished he had somebody to advise him. The wish was no sooner formed than granted. Just then there was a ring at the front-door, and in walked Dr. Urquhart.

"Good morning," said the doctor, coolly. "I'm afraid you've not had a very good night's rest, to judge by your appearance."

"I haven't slept a wink," acknowledged Tresham.

"I thought as much," replied the doctor. "What have you had for breakfast? — There, you needn't tell me. Drink a cup of strong coffee at once, and eat a slice of toast."

"I can't," said Tresham. "I want to speak to you, Urquhart. I've had the strangest——"

"Do as I tell you," interrupted Dr. Urquhart with decision. "I'll not listen to a word you say till you have put

yourself outside a cup of coffee. Strong, mind, with plenty of cream! Yes, that'll do. Later on I'll give you some bromides. Now, you can talk while you eat, if you choose."

"How's Mr. Insight?" inquired Tresham, after a gulp at his coffee, as he choked down a piece of toast.

"Better — decidedly better this morning," replied the doctor. "He has a splendid constitution, and I fancy will do me credit. How did you enjoy your walk last night?"

"It was pleasant enough," said Tresham, indifferently; "I think it did me good. But I was horribly upset again when I got back."

"What upset you?" asked the doctor.

Tresham put his hand into his pocket, and drew out the anonymous letter. "Read that," he said, handing it to Urquhart.

Dr. Urquhart knitted his dark eyebrows over the preposterous scrawl, reading it attentively twice through. A glimmer of amusement was visible in his face when he came to the signature; otherwise he looked thoughtful, and very stern.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Tresham, when he had finished.

"The accusation is plain enough," said Dr. Urquhart; "and so, if I mistake not, is the accuser. The accused, of

course, is young Charteris. What relations existed between him and Miss Insight?"

"I never knew that there were any beyond a friendly acquaintance," replied Tresham. "And yet, now you speak of it, I do remember that his manner to me has been rather distant of late; and she told me once that he was angry when he heard of our engagement; he thought the information ought to have come from me, I believe. But I really paid no attention to it: it never struck me that there was anything in it more important than a freak of petulance on his part. It's not possible, surely, there can have been anything serious——"

"Of course I know nothing about that part of the business," observed Dr. Urquhart; "but the writer of this distinctly says, or implies, that Miss Insight was last seen with the person accused of having gone away with her. It would be more satisfactory if we could have the testimony of this alleged eye-witness; but that might be attended with certain inconveniences at present. Who that eye-witness was I dare say could be easily discovered."

"And do you really think that this horrible story can be true? Do you believe it?" exclaimed Tresham.

"I think," replied the doctor, very seriously and deliberately, "that there must be some foundation for it. But mind you, that's a very different thing from saying I believe

that everything has occurred exactly as is hinted in this letter. If there is an honest witness who affirms that on such-and such a day he saw two people, both known to him by sight, walking together in a certain spot, there most assuredly are *primâ facie* grounds for accepting his affirmation as a true one. But if you ask me, plump and plain, whether I believe that Eric Charteris has eloped with Naomi Insight, I tell you at once that I do not."

"I hope most earnestly your intuition may prove right," said Tresham, leaning his elbows on the table, with clasped hands. "It looks black—dreadfully black; and yet *I* can't believe it, either. At the same time, I think Charteris ought to be communicated with—don't you? However innocent he may be, he may still be able to throw some light upon the matter; and I'm determined to leave no stone unturned to find out what has become of that poor girl."

"Most certainly," assented Urquhart. "In addition to which, it's only fair to Charteris to let him know the odium attaching to his name, in order that he may clear himself. I should write at once, if I were you."

"I'll do it now," said Tresham, rising quickly. "Don't go, Urquhart; you've no idea what a comfort it is to me to have you to talk to. And I want you to tell me whether I put it right to Charteris."

Dr. Urquhart accordingly seated himself in the most comfortable easy-chair in the room, lighted a cigar, and smoked silently while Tresham wrote. In five minutes the letter was finished, and Tresham put it into his friend's hands. It ran as follows :—

"My dear Charteris,—A very painful event has happened here since you left Heathercombe. Miss Insight has disappeared. She has not been seen since Saturday afternoon, and hitherto we have found no clue to her whereabouts. I cannot describe the state of distress I am in. It is reported that she was last seen in company with you, and you may imagine the damaging inferences that are drawn. Please communicate with me at once, and let me know when you return. Mr. Insight is seriously ill.—Yours ever, "Arthur Tresham.

"*Tuesday morning.*"

"That will do perfectly," said Dr. Urquhart, handing back the document to Tresham. "You have said enough to ensure a prompt reply, without a word too much. The post leaves at twelve, doesn't it? You'll hear from him to-morrow morning at latest, if he doesn't telegraph before."

Tresham closed and directed the envelope, and then, taking a cheroot from his case, began to smoke. The two men puffed quietly for some minutes without exchanging a word. At last Tresham said, meditatively—

"I suppose I shall have to preach again, as usual, next Sunday. It's not an agreeable prospect."

"No, I dare say not," replied Dr. Urquhart. "It will require an effort. But then, you know, efforts are salutary things in their way; and now that the first shock has passed off, I think it would be wise for you to do what you can in the direction of work. You're better off, at any rate, than poor Insight."

"That's true enough," said Tresham. "I suppose they'll be able to get somebody to carry on the services there as long as the old man's laid up, however. I'm not paralysed, and preach I must, sooner or later."

"I doubt whether Insight will ever do much more in that line," remarked the doctor, reflectively. "Not that he's likely to be incapacitated altogether; but he'll never be quite the man he was. A stroke, however light, leaves its mark on a man of that age. Pity, though; he was one of the few men I have ever heard whose sermons didn't exasperate me."

"The average merit of sermons is low, I confess," replied Tresham, "compared with the average merit of periodical literature. Ten sermons, taken haphazard, would probably compare very unfavourably, from the standpoint of pure dialectics, with ten articles, also taken haphazard, from any monthly or weekly periodical you like

to name. But then I don't consider the comparison a fair one. A sermon is not a sermon unless its tone is hortatory. People don't go to church to hear their own beliefs proved, but to receive guidance and support in matters of spiritual experience. To those who do not feel that they require guidance, of course such sermons have no interest."

"I must confess they have but little interest for me," rejoined the doctor. "Nine out of ten sermons I used to hear when a young man consisted of nothing but assumptions, assertions, and appeals. The assumptions in most cases appeared to me indefensible, the assertions often absurd, and the appeals consequently irrelevant. As to argument, there was seldom a trace of anything worthy of the name."

"I suppose the preachers of such sermons as you describe would consider argument out of place in a sphere of definite creeds," observed Tresham. "A creed, as such, is like a crystal: it is a lump of crystallised truth, or what is believed to be truth. What would be the use of arguing to prove what is accepted as a fact? You may discourse about it, point out the beauties of the crystal and the uses to which it should be put; but to expend one's energies in trying to prove that it really is what it professes and appears to be would be little better than a waste of time."

"And is that your position?" asked Urquhart, raising his eyebrows.

"Not altogether," replied Tresham, hesitating. "I don't believe in the crystallisation theory quite to that extent. But there must be a solid basis for us somewhere. The only question is how broad that basis is to be."

"Well," said the doctor, as he lighted a fresh cigar, "I confess that for my part I consider your simile false and vicious throughout. At least, I won't say *your* simile, but the simile you have quoted. I very much prefer the definition given by one of your own cloth—a creed is simply a register of the results of research up to a certain time. The truth of this is proved by the history of religions all through the ages. It's true in your own religion pre-eminently. The heterodoxy of yesterday is the orthodoxy of to-day; and the heterodoxy of to-day will be the orthodoxy of to-morrow. You have only to think how large a portion of Christian theology has become obsolete and abandoned in view of the advances made by science during the last thirty years. Why, what do some of your own bishops say about Genesis, for instance? That the account of creation is a poem—a subjective vision—with no more relation to the actual facts of the evolutionary process than the old legends about the Destroying Angel had to the phenomena of epidemics as explained by the theory

of germs. What would have been the fate of a clergyman who had ventured to avow such views half a century ago? A little earlier than that he would have been sent to the stake for less."

"You speak of research," said Tresham, "but you forget that Christianity is founded not upon research, but upon revelation. That, I mean, is our contention."

"I hadn't forgotten it," replied the doctor, drily. "When I get a revelation straight from heaven, I'll give up my researches; but under present conditions they are my only means of knowledge."

"The intellect is not always the safest guide in matters of spiritual import," remarked Tresham slowly.

"I fancy you wouldn't get along very well without it," said Urquhart; "though, to be sure, some people seem to rub on contentedly enough upon a marvellously small allowance. But as regards what you call your 'spiritual nature,' I confess I haven't the smallest notion what it is you mean. I am conscious of no such department in my own being. I have emotions, intelligence, will — of all these I am subjectively conscious; but further than this my intuitions do not lead me. Nor have I ever understood what grounds you have for associating the Author of the universe with what you call this 'spiritual nature' of man. What makes you think,

I mean, that the Creator is necessarily a religious being?"

"I haven't an idea what you can mean," replied Tresham, in amazement. "I never heard such an extraordinary question in my life. Isn't He the source of all our religious life—the object of all our spiritual and religious aspirations?"

"I am sure I don't know," replied Urquhart; "nor do I know the grounds on which you call him so. It seems to me that you religionists have, as it were, monopolised the Head of the Universe in a most audacious manner. The facts are simple enough. You are the subjects of a certain order of very curious and mystical emotions. You talk of rapture, communion, conversion, contrition, assurance, peace, faith, and a variety of similar phenomena, and you give expression to these feelings in the singing of hymns, the offering of prayer, the performance of abstruse ceremonies, and other proceedings of the same description. Now what reason have you for associating the Creator with such things? What makes you think of him as the most fitting object of your prayers and praises? How do you know that he takes the slightest possible interest in them? For all you can tell, his attributes may be such as to make him turn away from the sight of a praying, singing, worshipping congregation with feelings of compassionate or amused contempt, if

not with complete indifference. Now I, for my part, cannot conceive of the Creator as head of the religious interest at all. I have at least an equal right to fancy him what we should call a scientific character—the great embodiment and source of all physical and material laws; and if such an idea as worship ever seriously entered my head, I should choose the performance of some important chemical experiment as the likeliest rite to please him, and seek his approval rather in the sphere of the higher mathematics than in visionary speculations concerning imputed righteousness or the election of grace."

"The Christian conception of God is far more philosophical than yours," replied Tresham. "You would make Him Head over the material universe, and nothing more; we worship Him as Head over all—science, philosophy, ethics, what you will. And the nearer you get to Him, the sooner you will find the truth in every direction that you may look for it."

"Well, I would rather find him through science and philosophy than by adventuring myself into such very misty cloudland as a religious system," said Dr. Urquhart, promptly. "I dare say you think I have been speaking of a matter upon which I have bestowed no attention. That is not quite the case. I was very religiously brought up; my parents were Evangelicals of the most ardent and

aggressive type, and I ran the gauntlet of their well-meant endeavours to convert me till I was nineteen years of age. At last I wrenched myself free. It so happened that a Church Mission, as they called it, was held in the town, and I, actuated more by curiosity than anything else, went to one of the services. Anything more abominably unhealthy, more thoroughly mischievous in its tendency, I never witnessed. The missioner, a very able man in his way I should think, was preaching when I arrived. He wept, he shouted, he threatened, and he implored. He told the good people that however desperate their state might be, a certain mental effort, made under certain conditions, would in a moment ensure them an eternity of celestial bliss. They might have it, he said, that very instant—before they went out of church—while he was yet speaking. He painted the horrors of the hell which yawned for them if they did not make that effort, and the delights of the heaven that awaited them if they did. Women and children began to sob. The choir sang hymns while the congregation knelt. Missioners went round to the pews and entered into private conversation with the most promising subjects, who sobbed and whispered in return. The air seemed to become electrical, and the contagion spread. One effort—and heaven was theirs from that time forward and for ever! And that might be the last opportunity.

Then a woman fainted. I could stand it no longer. I rushed out of the overheated building, with its singing, and praying, and weeping, and regained the cool air outside. I crossed the road and got into a field where there was nobody but myself, and then, as I walked along in the silence, I looked up at Orion, and thought how calm, and grand, and beautiful the stars were. What a blessed contrast to that awful church, full of poor, frightened, excited creatures, intoxicated with their own delusions! How many of them, I wondered, had *not* been able to make that magic effort, had *not* been the subjects of that spiritual spasm, which was to close heli's door before them and open the portals of heaven? From that moment I made my choice. I turned in pitying horror from the half-delirious throng of devotees, and vowed that I'd devote my life to science. On one hand, a system of dogmas—illogical, unscientific, self-contradictory, and leading to horrible conclusions as regards nine-tenths of the human race; on the other, the passionless calm of Nature, and a knowledge of her changeless laws. The sight of those tranquil orbs, and the thought of what the universe actually is, in duration and extent, fixed my choice for ever. My mother, poor soul! had set her heart on my taking orders. I became a doctor by profession, and took to mathematics as a hobby. To me the properties of the hypotenuse constitute a far

more wonderful and precious truth than the final perseverance of saints, and the simple fact that two and two make four outweighs all that was ever written upon the Athanasian Creed."

"It all sounds very strange to me," said Tresham. "I have heard of such views before, but vaguely—I never met anybody who really held them. Is it possible they can make you happy? Does it cost you no pang to abandon all hopes of a future life?"

"I never said I had no hopes of a future life," replied the doctor, puffing up his cigar. "Personally I hope there may be one in store for us. I confess I should not like to be suddenly snuffed out of existence with so much still to be learnt. But I must say that your Christian notions of the existence after death do not commend themselves either to my reason or my taste. They show, at least, a very curious lack of imagination. For the lost, for those, that is, who have never experienced 'conversion,' but a large proportion of whom are kindly, moral, respectable, law-abiding folks, you tell us of a fate so barbarous, so inhuman, so savage, that I sometimes doubt whether you can really believe in it yourselves. Every soul in this world outside the fervent but very limited *clique* who call themselves 'the Lord's dear people' is to be plunged into a state of torture unimaginable by mortal man, without hope or pro-

spect of its ever coming to an end. How it is that all you who profess to believe in it don't become raving lunatics passes my comprehension. Then, for the saved, we have a heaven of light and glory, a combination of sunset clouds and the aurora borealis, where the inhabitants are to spend eternity in singing anthems and giving expression to a type of feeble and insipid piety which cannot possibly satisfy the requirements of any rational human being. You may say that this conception is not justified by any hints or statements in the Bible. That may or may not be true; but it *is* justified by your popular hymns and devotional writings, and these I presume are intended to be based on Scriptural teachings. Only the other evening, I was passing one of the chapels here, and heard them singing the concluding lines of a hymn in which the rapture of heaven was defined as

> 'Prostrate before Thy throne to lie,
> And *ever gaze on Thee.*'

You have only to put yourself into the prescribed position on the hearth-rug here, and try to look up at the ceiling, to discover its physical painfulness, not to say impossibility; but apart from such considerations, how would you care to spend a million years in such a state of mind as is here portrayed? Now my notion of heaven, could I bring

myself to believe in it at all, would be widely different. I don't care for music, and should make a shocking mess of it if I had to play a harp. But show me the prospect of penetrating deeper and deeper into the mysteries of the universe: promise me full and unimpeded play for my mental faculties: give me scope for untiring activity, bodily —if there be such things as bodies in the next life—and intellectual: let me do something towards helping, comforting, or elevating those whose circumstances may be less favourable than my own; then, at any rate, I shall have something worth hoping for, and worth believing in."

"I think you are not justified in basing such taunts at the Christian heaven upon the pietistic expressions used by ignorant men," replied Tresham. "I don't suppose educated people believe that there is to be nothing but worship in heaven, though worship, and even ritual worship, is most undoubtedly described as taking place there in the concluding chapters of the Apocalypse. And as to what you say about the overwhelming numbers of the lost, I utterly repudiate it. I believe myself that a very large proportion of the human race will be saved; and I do not believe for a moment that a single soul that is lost will have been 'kindly, moral, respectable, and law-abiding' during its life on earth."

"Then you must give up your Bible," retorted Dr.

Urquhart. "After all, the only consistent Christians are the Calvinists, who teach the most terrific doctrines that ever entered the mind of man. I tell you, Tresham, there is not a single article of that atrocious creed which cannot be *proved* by the plainest declarations of Scripture. Election, reprobation, and eternal torment are all true if the Bible is true. They stand or fall with that. A man can't be saved unless he was fore-ordained to be saved millions of ages before he was ever born. He must be damned if he was fore-ordained to be damned under the same arbitrary and irrevocable conditions. 'For,' says Calvin, 'men are not all created with a similar destiny, but eternal life is fore-ordained for some, and eternal damnation for others.' Can you look me in the face and say that there is no foundation in Scripture for this monstrous statement? You know there is. Why, the very fact of foreknowledge, which you certainly will not deny to an omniscient Being, when coupled with omnipotence, is tantamount to fore-ordination. Is God never represented in the Bible as inciting men to sin and then punishing them for sinning? Is he never represented as deceiving men, and then punishing them for their credulity? 'And if the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him.' What a

picture—an almighty, all-knowing, infinite Enemy, tempting and deceiving the wretched creatures of his own hand, in order to visit upon them the appalling vengeance of eternal fires! mocking them with offers of mercy he has rendered them powerless to accept—when he says 'all,' meaning but a few! Doesn't your very blood run cold when you think of it? Why, no man *can* come to Christ unless the Father draw him—unless the Father gives him power to become a son of God. And then think, you know, how very few there are who are thus favoured. It matters not how good a man may be. The best and kindest of fathers, the most unselfish of sons, the most devoted of daughters—people who have made the world brighter and happier for their living in it, who have diffused cheerfulness and hopefulness around them, or even who have simply done their allotted tasks more or less satisfactorily—the neither very good nor very bad—ah! lump them all together; they have not been 'born again,' they do not talk about Christ as their precious Saviour, they have not consciously washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, they have no mystical experience, no conviction of sin, no special joy in a risen Christ; lump them all together, and bind them in faggots for hell. No don't protest! it *is* so; they have not fulfilled the one essential and prescribed

condition—they have never been *converted;* and the doom, the Scriptural doom, of such is hopeless and irrevocable damnation. It was thoughts like these that surged up in my mind at the Mission service I told you of just now, when I took my resolve to cut myself adrift from Christianity. I felt and saw that these odious doctrines had the fullest sanction of Biblical authority, and I therefore rejected the whole system there and then for ever."

"Then all I can say is, that you came to a very hasty conclusion," replied Tresham. "Doesn't it strike you that the shocking view you take of Christianity is *not* held by the majority of educated men? Can you look, for instance, at the Church of England, and not see that but a very small proportion of her ablest theologians either preach or believe such doctrines?"

"I don't say they do," replied the doctor; "indeed, I am very sure they don't. All I say is that the doctrines you stigmatise as so shocking are taught in the Bible; how you get over them I don't profess to explain. Indeed, I find it difficult to discover what it is you do believe. I have often heard preachers condemn this and that eccentricity of popular theology, but there they stop—they never give one a clear and succinct *resumé* of what they believe themselves as a compact system, supporting it by Scriptural quotations, and explaining those very awkward passages

that tell against them. I have, to the best of my unsanctified and poor abilities, tested the main points of Christianity and found them wanting. I no more believe in its essential doctrines than I believe that the prophet Isaiah made the earth come to a sudden stop, spin round backwards upon its axis, and turn six o'clock in the evening into eight o'clock in the morning, to prove to a petty Syrian king that a poultice was a good thing for a boil. I utterly reject the idea of God as presented both in the Old Testament and in those parts of the New where he is depicted as the deliberate and intentional destroyer, from all eternity, of nine-tenths of his own offspring. I vastly prefer the conviction, which I hold in common with all who reverently and modestly call themselves Agnostics, that he is both unknown and unknowable. There is relief from madness in that, if there is nothing else."

"I've caught you now," said Tresham, with a faint smile. "That is a contradiction. If, as you say, He is unknown, how can you possibly tell that He is unknowable? By the very terms of your proposition, you have no grounds to go upon. Besides, to say that an omnipotent Being is unknowable is to prove Him not omnipotent; for the statement implies and involves the converse, namely, that He is unable to make Himself known to man, thereby limiting His power."

"Can God reveal himself to snails or fish?" replied the doctor. "And yet you say he is omnipotent. If a man makes a pint bottle, he will find he cannot put more than a pint of liquid into it; though it does not follow he cannot make a quart bottle if he chooses. All I want to show you is that the prevalent ideas of God, supposing such a Power to exist, are unworthy, illogical, and impossible. You must bring your reason to bear upon the subject; and the same book from which you profess to derive such consolation and happiness contains an inextricable mixture of that which, if language means anything at all, involves a radical hostility alike to happiness and to common sense."

"I believe in God in spite of everything!" cried Tresham; "and though you have brought me face to face with some most dreadful mysteries, I believe that He is good. That Christianity is logically defensible I am convinced; though logic is not the best path, perhaps, by which belief in it can be attained. One wants something more than logic when bowed down with anxiety and grief."

"True," replied the doctor, jumping up briskly. "Logic is all very well in its way, but bromides are often far more valuable. Give me a slip of paper, and I'll write you a prescription. There—you're to take this three times a day in a wine-glassful of water. Don't forget, now. I'll post

your letter for you, and mind you let me know as soon as you get an answer."

So saying, Dr. Urquhart threw away the stump of his cigar, wiped his pen on the tail of his coat, and with a friendly nod to Tresham marched out of the house as abruptly as he had come in.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE RESULT OF THE LETTER.

If Tresham had undergone severe suffering from the suddenness and sharpness of the blow that had fallen upon him, he had now to brace himself to bear the more intolerable torture of suspense. He never doubted that Wednesday morning's post would bring him a letter from Eric; indeed, he thought it quite probable that he might even receive a telegram from him before night. Surely no honourable man, with such an imputation resting on him, would delay a single hour in clearing himself, and so far relieving the uneasiness of the man whom he was believed to have injured. But the morning post came in and brought no letter for Tresham. The disappointment was crushing, and it was intensified by the agonising dread that the scandal which had reached him was well founded. A hundred times a day he vowed that he would go up to town and present himself at Ricochet's lodgings in Mount Street, in order to meet Eric face to face if he were there, or find out something of his movements if he were not;

but each time he feared lest by so doing he might cross a letter on the way, and so concluded to give the post another chance. His indecision contributed to his distress of mind, and had it not been for Dr. Urquhart's bromides, the probability was, as the doctor told him afterwards, that the tension would have resulted in a serious attack of illness.

By Friday evening he was, indeed, in a fair way to break down altogether. He had eaten scarcely anything since dinner on the Saturday when Naomi had disappeared, and this, combined with the feverish restlessness which kept him from sleeping at night and rendered it impossible for him to remain quiet by day, were beginning to tell upon him. He looked thin and haggard; his nerves became morbidly sensitive, and he flushed and started painfully at every sudden noise, only to sink into deeper despondency as it proved a false alarm. It was now Friday evening, and he was sitting sadly enough in his study, with a reading-lamp turned down low upon his table. His head was resting upon one hand, and for a few minutes he had felt as though a slight, faint drowsiness were stealing over him. The sensation was grateful to him; he encouraged it, hoping that he might fall asleep. But just as he was approaching that quiescent state which is the harbinger of semi-consciousness, he was aroused by a footfall on the

stair. The door burst open, and the next moment Eric Charteris stood before him.

The relief was wonderful. For a few moments Tresham, now wide awake, could scarcely speak, so great was the revulsion of his feelings. Half the weight that had been crushing him was lifted off his mind, and he rose eagerly and quickly to his feet.

"My dear fellow," cried Eric, in his old boisterous way, throwing his hat and stick upon the table, "I'm so awfully shocked at what you tell me has happened, I don't know how to speak to you about it. How are you? Let's turn up the light. That's better. By Jove, old man, how ill you look! I never got your letter till to-day; we haven't been staying in Mount Street, and it was by the merest chance we called round there this morning, where we found it lying for me. I should have been here two days ago if it had reached me sooner."

"I've had an awful time of it, Eric," replied Tresham, "and I couldn't understand your silence. But I feel ever so much better now you've come. What do you know about this terrible business?"

"Very little, old fellow," replied Eric; "but I'll tell you all I know, if you'll tell me more about what's happened first. But before we begin, I really think you ought to have something to keep your pecker up. Lord! I never

saw such a hobgoblin as you look. Let me do the honours of your own house to you. Where's the key of your sideboard?"

"It's open, I believe," said Tresham. "Will you have a glass of wine or anything?"

Without replying, Eric got up, took a decanter of port-wine out of the cupboard, and made Tresham drink a glassful, standing over him while he did so. "There," he said, "that'll put a spark of life into you. Thanks! I don't mind having a glass too, to show there's no ill feeling. And now tell me all about this business."

Tresham did so briefly. He detailed the circumstances of Naomi's disappearance, the consequent illness of her father, the rumours that were afloat, and the receipt of the anonymous letter. This he produced, and put it into Eric's hand.

"And did you really believe this infernal fabrication?" asked Eric, when he had finished reading it.

"I neither believed it nor disbelieved it," replied Tresham. "I was simply in a maze. It was Urquhart who made me write to you as I did, partly in justice to yourself."

"Well, Tresham," rejoined Eric, "I must say I think you might have done me still more justice. To imagine, even for a moment, that I could have deliberately run away with a girl who was to marry you in a few months, shows

that you know very little about me. I never set myself up for a saint, but there's a pretty big difference between being a saint and being a scoundrel. I don't care one pip what scandalmongers here may say of me; they may accuse me of all the crimes in the calendar if they think fit. But I confess I do care a little for what you think."

"My dear Eric," exclaimed Tresham, "I beg you to say no more. Remember the cruel blow that had fallen upon me, and the complete mystery which enveloped it. I knew not where to look for a clue. Suddenly I get that confounded letter, which professed to explain the whole thing. The explanation was if anything worse than the mystery, for it threw a horrible slur both on you and her. But you do know something more than I do, at any rate. What is it?"

"It's not much," replied Eric, slowly. He did not look quite comfortable now it had come to the point, and before he began he turned round to light a cheroot over the reading-lamp which stood upon the table. "The fact is, old man," he continued, puffing out a volume of fragrant smoke, "the fact is, I've been behaving rather like a fool lately. Now I look back upon it all, I don't believe I ever really cared a bit for Miss Insight—not in that way, you know. But I liked her, and I used to be a good deal with her, and up till only a few days ago I had no more idea

that she was engaged to you than the Pope of Rome. When I heard it, it came upon me like a thunderclap. It seemed to me that she had been amusing herself with me at my own expense, and encouraging me in a way that might certainly have led to serious misunderstandings. And I felt very sore with you. I hadn't a notion that you and she were more than the most ordinary acquaintances, and it seemed to me as if you had been playing dark. I don't believe that a bit now—I know better. I shall always think that I was misled; but you had no hand in it. Well, I met you both at the Duke's, you remember, and I certainly spoke my mind to her. She evidently thought I was behaving like a bear, and, on looking back, I don't think she was far wrong. In any case, I had no right to go for her as I did."

"I remember thinking you looked cross," said Tresham, as Eric paused, "but of course I didn't connect it with anything like what you're mentioning now. Indeed, it's news to me that you were ever on a footing of intimacy with her at all. She never breathed a syllable to me on the subject."

Eric drew down his lips with a contemptuous little *moue*, which the other did not perceive. "I dare say not," he said.

"Go on," said Tresham, beginning to feel nervous.

"Well, the long and the short of it is," resumed Eric, "that we had a high old quarrel; or perhaps it would be more proper to say that I was angry with her for having been engaged to you all the time she was encouraging me, and that she warmly resented my resentment. But I couldn't bear to part with her like that, and later in the evening I asked her if she wouldn't go out for one more walk with me before I went up to London. She consented, not very willingly, I thought; and promised to meet me near the bridge at the end of Jordan Lane on the Saturday —which was last Saturday—at five o'clock."

"Then it *is* true that you were seen with her!" cried Tresham, in some excitement.

"Very likely," replied Eric; "at any rate, it's true that we went for a walk together. But it's also true that I left her near the station at about a quarter to seven, and that I've no more idea where she went to after that than you have yourself."

Tresham sat, silent and frowning, trying to extract whatever significance there might be in this new scrap of information. It was little enough, in all conscience. Before, they only knew of Naomi's doings up till five o'clock, when she left her father's house. Now, they knew what she had done with herself for an hour and three-quarters afterwards; but from that point the mystery was as thick

as ever. The *cul de sac* had only been lengthened a little; it was a *cul de sac* still.

Then a thought struck Tresham. Eric and Naomi had been together for an hour and a half, and they had probably talked about the subject uppermost in the mind of each. No doubt some clue might be discovered here.

"Eric," he said, "you've been very candid with me hitherto, and though I cannot but feel that I have a right to your candour, I'm obliged to you for it. I'm sure, too, you'll acknowledge that you scarcely acted very loyally to me in making an appointment of such a nature with a girl who was my betrothed wife. For the sake of her good name, if for no other reason, you should have shrunk from it. But enough of that. There's something beyond, which concerns yourself. Hasn't it occurred to you that, in the event—which God forbid!—of that poor child—I mean, of any terrible discovery being made about her—your own position would be a very serious one?" Eric started violently, and coloured to the roots of his hair. "Of course," continued Tresham, "I am only putting a case. I don't suppose for a moment that you wouldn't be able to prove every word you've said to the satisfaction of any jury in England; still your position would be very awkward, and you yourself would be exposed to much annoyance and anxiety. Just think, then, a minute, and

tell me as clearly as you can what it was that you and she talked about on Saturday. She may have said something which will prove a clue to her fate or movements since."

Eric hesitated. It might well be that words had passed between him and Naomi which he could not repeat to Tresham. He felt, too, that Tresham's reproach was deserved—that he had had no business to force so compromising an appointment on the girl, and that he had acted foolishly and badly throughout. And yet the girl had dealt deceitfully towards him too. He thought for a minute or so, and then, puffing up his cigar, said—

"I'll tell you all I can. When we first met, I told her I thought she hadn't acted fairly by me. I can't help it, Tresham—I did think, and I still think so. But never mind that now. She replied, and it sounded curiously to me, that some people didn't know when they were well off. She repeated this more than once—said even that she believed the worst turn she could do a man would be to marry him. I replied that you evidently didn't think so. 'Ah!' she exclaimed, 'if we were going to be married at once it might turn out all right. There's many a slip, you know.' All this was Greek to me, but there was no getting anything more out of her. I couldn't make head or tail of half she said, and she never would explain. It was no use trying to make her. We walked some way up the West-

hampton Road, scarcely exchanging a syllable. I told her something of my own troubles—for I'd just had a most fearful scene with the mater. I suppose you haven't heard anything about that. But there was nothing more—absolutely nothing. She never dropped a single hint about any change in her own plans, or gave me the slightest reason to suppose that when I had got into the train she was going anywhere else than back to her own house."

"And can't you recall any of those sayings of hers which you say struck you as so inexplicable?" urged Tresham, anxiously.

"I really can't," said Eric. "Several times she said queer things which seemed to have no connection with what we were talking about, but I don't remember what they were. If I'd attached any sense or meaning to them, I dare say they'd have stuck. I only noticed that she seemed to be wool-gathering, and was every now and then making irrelevant remarks, to which I had no key."

This was unsatisfactory enough; but Eric was evidently speaking in perfect good faith, and there was no more to be got out of him. And yet he had remembered one thing. What in the world could Naomi have meant by saying that the worst turn she could do a man would be to marry him? It was just like one of her queer sayings—sayings to which he, like Eric, had had no key. What in the name of com-

mon sense was the mystery about this girl? Why had she advised him not to persevere in his suit when he first asked her to be his wife? What was the explanation of her sudden anxiety for a speedy marriage, and the horror which came into her face when she was told her father wanted her to wait two years? From beginning to end there had been something enigmatical about her, which he had failed entirely to penetrate; and now all was crowned by this terrible enigma of her disappearance. Eric's story threw no light upon it. The mystery was as dark as ever.

"By the way," said Eric, suddenly, after the two had sat for some time in silent thought, "I have a scrap of information for you that you may be glad of. Do you remember our dining some weeks ago with Ricochet, and his telling us some cock-and-bull story about a girl's escapade at a school in Frankfort?"

"Frankfort?" repeated Tresham, turning his eyes towards Eric. "Yes, I do. It worried me horribly. The girl had carried on an intrigue with some man or other, and had used one of the small children as a go-between. Ricochet said he believed the girl was——"

"That's it," rejoined Eric; "and I expect you believed it too. Well, it wasn't. It was a different person altogether. You know what a straightforward sort of a fellow old Ricochet is, and it seems that he wrote to his friend in

Frankfort to find out the truth. If you'd like to see the reply, you can. I brought it on purpose to show you."

"Give it me," said Tresham, breathlessly.

Eric put his hand in his pocket and drew out a letter, which he handed without a word to Tresham. It ran as follows :—

"FRANKFORT-AM-MAIN,
August 20.

"MY DEAR RICOCHET,—Just received your note, in which you ask whether a Miss Insight was the heroine of the recent rumpus at Fräulein Plänckner's school that I told you of when I last wrote. No, that was not the name. It was a young woman named Jarvis. I only knew of the affair because the hero of it was a friend of mine. I'm sorry to add that Miss Jarvis died soon after she was expelled. A sad business altogether.

"Ta-ta! Shall be glad to see you again when next you're in these parts.—Yours ever,

"ARCHIBALD DRUMMOND."

"Thank God for that!" ejaculated Tresham, throwing himself back in his chair. "Not that Ricochet had any business to bring *her* name into it; he might very well have got at the real person without that. But I do feel thankful—very thankful. I only repent that I ever doubted her for a single moment."

"I'm glad too," said Eric. "It wasn't a pleasant story.

—Ten o'clock!" he exclaimed, looking at his watch. "I suppose I ought to be off. I'm going to sleep at the Crown."

"Why, aren't you going home?" asked Tresham, surprised.

"Well, you see, they don't expect me to-night," said Eric, twirling his gloves, "and its already pretty late. Besides, I hate the place. You've no idea what a frightful scene I had with the mater the day I went away. Do you know, Tresham, I believe that infernal hypocrite, Leech, is driving her out of her senses. In solemn earnest, I don't believe she's perfectly right in her head. You see, now: I'll bet you a new hat she doesn't take the slightest notice of me when I go in. She never speaks unless she's forced to, and when she does—oh, Moses! it's enough to throw one into blue convulsions. I shall have to go back, of course, but I'm blowed if I stay there a day longer than I can help."

"I know it must be hard for you," said Tresham. "But don't go to an hotel. It wouldn't look well. Stay and sleep here. I can give you a bed, and you shall have some supper. I almost feel as though I could peck a bit myself."

Eric consented readily, and his fresh talk and liveliness as they ate their cold meat did Tresham good. He gave

an amusing account of his visit to Ricochet, and almost made his host laugh by a description of some comical adventure that had befallen him during a journey on the Underground Railway. Tresham went to bed soon after eleven, and sank into a refreshing sleep. Eric's follies and Eric's chatter had proved a better medicine to him than Urquhart's heresies—even than Urquhart's bromides.

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. MASS MEETS AN OLD FRIEND.

THE reader of these pages may possibly remember the sensation caused at the Duke of Grandchester's ball by a certain Mr. Mass, described as a Chicago millionaire. It would, perhaps, be too venturesome were we to endorse the statement of Mr. Tresham respecting the income of this gentleman, but there is no doubt that he was a man of very enormous wealth. Mr. Bawston Mass had commenced life as a Backwoods lawyer in Nebraska, and for some years had thereby enjoyed the brevet rank of Jedge. A commission in the Federal army had conferred upon him the additional distinction of a Gineralship; and it was on retiring from the camp at the conclusion of the war that he had assumed the editorial chair of the *Denver Straddlebug*, one of the most influential papers in the Union. From that time he became a prosperous man. His position brought him into contact with very many leading politicians, while the important controversy in which he was smart enough to engage with the *Colorado Mugwump* on the great

question of the pork-packers' strikes, just then attracting considerable attention in Congress, increased the circulation of his paper to a most satisfactory extent. Lucrative openings were placed in his way; the profits of his paper were always judiciously invested; speculations in which he thought fit to participate were sure of all the furtherance that it was in the growing power of the *Straddlebug* to give; and eventually the dollars, which at first had shown much coyness to his advances, began to roll in by thousands. At the time of which we are writing, Mr. Bawston Mass was one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the States; a mixture of simplicity and shrewdness, lavish in the spending of his money, yet looking to every cent in his accounts. He was a generous man, and his personal tastes and habits were of the plainest; he had been known to perform the most Quixotic actions when his sympathies were appealed to, but was merciless in exacting the uttermost farthing in cases where an attempt had been made by unscrupulous or misguided persons to get the better of him in a contract.

Such, then, was the "good American man" now staying in Heathercombe as the guest of Mr. Pound. There had long been a connection between the two in business, and the country banker had been only too glad to extend his hospitality to the great millionaire, whose visit to England, though "a spec'lation," as he himself said, was partly

devoted to the study of British institutions, political and social. Mr. Mass had been over a fortnight in the little town, and had of course heard of the sensational disappearance of Miss Insight,—an event which he was wont to discuss with much philosophic composure. He kept up a constant and somewhat copious correspondence with America, much of which was believed to consist in letters to the *Straddlebug*, describing the life and manners, the politics and the fiscal administration, of our little island; and he was for ever receiving lengthy telegrams from his agent in Chicago, relating to the extensive transactions which were being carried on in his name during his prolonged absence. It was, therefore, without much surprise that, one morning, Mr. Pound found his guest poring over a voluminous despatch which had just been forwarded to him through a London office.

"Are you likely to be very busy to-day?" inquired Mr. Pound. "I was thinking we might go and pay a call or two this afternoon in the neighbourhood, if you've nothing else to do."

"I shall be at your service, Sir," replied Mr. Mass deliberately, "dooring the afternoon. This morning I have an important cablegram to send."

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" said Mr. Pound, as he drank his cup of tea.

"No, Sir," replied Mr. Mass. "Only an incident. The *Straddlebug* seems to have been flounderin' a bit, and the *Mugwump* has been goin' for us. That we don't mind so much. But now we've got the *Shiloh Carpetbagger* bandyin' compliments, and they want my help. This cablegram, Sir, is a digest of the *Carpetbagger's* last editorial. I shall study it, Sir, after breakfast, and then I shall compose a slogger for to-morrow's *Straddlebug* in reply."

"Do you mean an article?" asked Mr. Pound, amazed.

"I do, Sir," said Mr. Mass; "an editorial. And it will be a slogger. This time to-morrow, Sir, unless the wires air blocked, that editorial will occupy the leading column of the *Denver Straddlebug*, and be read by one hundred and seventy thousand of the Amurr'can public. The *Carpetbagger* will squirm, Sir, and the *Mugwump* will look sick. And now, Sir, if you'll excuse me, I'll retire up."

"And you mean to say you're going to cable a leading article to America?" exclaimed Mr. Pound, with interest. "Well, now, that's very enterprising—very. The subject is an important one, no doubt?"

"It is important, Sir," said Mr. Mass, gravely. "An attack was made some time ago upon our whisky-mills, Sir, by a number of female well-wishers of mankind: the Brides o' Temperance, the Daughters o' Rechab, and others of the same sort. These persons, headed by Miss

Temperance P. Tippits and Mrs. Anathema Maranatha Skeggs, collected around our mills, and sang at us by the hour together, demanding of us, as a special favour to themselves, that we should send all the whisky in the place swimming down street. But with that request, Sir," continued Mr. Mass, with increasing gravity, "we concluded not to comply. Of course they raised Je-roosalem, and we took up the affair in the *Straddlebug*. Off went a deppitation o' the Brides and Daughters to the *Mugwump*, and sure enough a day or two later out came a column of vitooperation, for which, as a candid man, I think the editor deserves great credit. We admired him generously, Sir, and gave it him back hot. 'Course, when I say *we*, I mean my editorial staff. I wasn't in the neighbourhood myself,—in fact, I had been in England here some months. But I kep' my eye on the fight, and we seemed to be taking a fair amount of change out of the *Mugwump* when the *Carpetbagger* must needs put in its oar. The *Carpetbagger* went too far. The *Mugwump* confined itself to urging that the whisky-mills should be closed for the credit of the *Straddlebug* itself, and published a table of statistics, very ingeniously compiled, showing the number of cocktails consoomed in our office daily for the period of one year. We were accused of being notorious drunkards, of filling our paper with literairy hogwash, of wearing second-hand

clothes, of swindling our laundresses, of forging telegrams in order to rig the share-market, and of chewing checkerberry lozenges in church. Of course that was all fair and above-board enough. It was simply the *Mugwump's* way of showing that it had taken sides with the Daughters of Rechab against the *Straddlebug* about the whisky-mills. Besides, I knew that Eliphalet P. Flack, the editor, was a gentleman, and not likely to exceed the courtesies of literairy controversy. But now that the *Carpetbagger* has put in its spoke, it's about time I interfered. The *Carpetbagger*, Sir, presooms to advocate the closing of my whisky-mills on the ground that the bar-tenders of Denver City do not know how to fix cocktails. That is more than a self-respecting citizen can stand; and it is therefore necessary that such monumental scurrility should be put down," concluded Mr. Mass very seriously, as he champed an unlighted cigar by way of enjoying what he called a "dry smoke."

"But, bless my soul," exclaimed Mr. Pound, pushing away his plate, and staring at the imperturbable countenance of his guest,—"bless my soul, do you mean to say you're not going to bring an action against that *Mugwump* man for libel?"

"I have the greatest respect, Sir," returned Mr. Mass, with a certain gentle melancholy in his voice, "for the

Script'ral injunction to return good for evil; but I do *not* think it incumbent upon me to go that length. Flack wouldn't do it for me. Why, Sir, an action for libel would be worth ten thousand dollars to him. His circulation would expand like a balloon. Our interchange of ideas about the porkpackers' strike ensured the standing of the *Straddlebug* when it was first started, and I acknowledge the obligation. But it does not follow, accordin' to my views, that I'm bound to make his fortune for him in return."

"Well, well, don't let me keep you from your work," said the bewildered banker, rising from the table. "I only advise nobody to say such things in print about *me*. What time will you be ready to go out?"

"I shall have put everything through before lunch," returned Mr. Mass, gathering up his papers very deliberately, "so you've only your own convenience to consult."

"I thought we might pay a round of visits," observed Mr. Pound. "I have owed Lady Sharp a call for some time, among others. I forget whether you have met her ladyship?"

"I have not," replied Mr. Mass, "and shall be glad to interview her."

Thus it fell out that the American stranger was destined to play an unexpected part in the drama in which Lady

Sharp was so prominent a character, and by a chance visit to exercise an important influence upon her fate. It need scarcely be said that Lady Sharp feared and avoided strangers. In her morbid condition of mind she shrank from intercourse with most of her fellow-creatures; but she was too conscientious to deny herself to visitors on the plea of being "not at home." Her destiny was now rushing on her. Did she catch its advancing footfalls?

On Monday morning she received a short note from Eric, announcing his return, and informing her that she might expect him in the afternoon. It was contrary to Tresham's better judgment that Eric had abstained from going home on the morning after his arrival at Heathercombe; but the lad was obstinate, and Tresham, who did not much wonder at his reluctance, found himself so much better for Eric's company that he did not press the matter. But it was clearly impossible that he should continue to absent himself from his mother's house, especially in view of the scandalous reports that had been spread about his supposed flight with Naomi, although, as far as the public were concerned, all such slanders had been disposed of by his prolonged sojourn under Tresham's roof.

"Well, mother!" Once more the voice of her young son rang, clear and pleasant, in the ears of Lady Sharp. She was sitting alone in her dingy dining-room, Edith

having escaped from a house where she was not wanted to the friendly companionship of Beatrice. The sound aroused her, and caused her to start violently. One look she gave him, as his bright face appeared at the door of the gloomy apartment; then her eyes fell again immediately, and she uttered not one word.

"Mother, are you better?" asked Eric, advancing.

Still there was no reply.

"Why won't you speak to me?" he said, in a very gentle voice.

"How dare *you* speak to *me!*" cried Lady Sharp, in sudden fury. "How dare you pollute my house with your presence? Go—go to your victim. Go to the wretched creature you have ruined—ruined for time and for eternity. If you are not wholly vile, go—and let me try and forget that ever I bore a son."

"Mother, you are mad," retorted Eric, sharply. "Before I went to London you raved at me in just the same way, but brought no charge against me; and now I find you accusing me of a crime of which I am incapable. It's no use my appealing to you as a mother; I only ask for reason. I tell you I am as innocent as you are, and that your accusations are as false as they are absurd."

"What!" replied Lady Sharp, "do you deny your guilt?"

"What guilt?" rejoined Eric. "I suppose you've heard those scandalmongering stories about Naomi Insight, and you've lent only too ready an ear to them. Do you really believe I ran away with her?"

"I do," replied his mother.

"Then how is it I've come back without her?" said Eric, scornfully.

"You wouldn't be the only one who had destroyed a woman's whole life and then deserted her," said Lady Sharp. "Perhaps you've not deserted her; she may still be under your protection."

"God forgive you for your wicked suspicions!" cried Eric, passionately. "You, who ought to be the first to believe in me and defend me, are most anxious to make me out a villain. Won't it suffice for you to know that I have been sleeping for the last three nights under the roof of the man you believe me to have injured, and that he, at any rate, has no belief whatever in my guilt?"

"I must really beg you not to refer to that person in my house," returned Lady Sharp. "It was an evil day for me when he came here. I cannot be expected to know what understanding may exist between you, and am only anxious that you should not afflict me longer with your presence."

"You seem very impatient to get rid of your only son,"

said Eric. "Do you like the prospect of finding yourself all alone in the world?"

"I shall not be alone," returned Lady Sharp, defiantly. "You are not, and never can be, a support to me; and God has sent me the protection that I need."

"What in heaven's name do you mean?" exclaimed Eric, puzzled by her words, and still more puzzled by the sanctimoniously complacent expression which now appeared upon her face.

"If I tell you, it is only because the news will no doubt hasten your departure," replied Lady Sharp. "Bitterly disappointed in my prayers for you, and weighed down by an anguish of which one like yourself can have no idea, I have accepted the offer of the man who has supported me through all my trials to make me one with himself for life. You have cursed him and insulted him, and I do not wish that you should meet. God has deprived me of a son, but is giving me a compensation——"

"Mother!" exclaimed Eric, horrified. "Do I hear aright? Do you mean to tell me you are going to be married *again?*"

"You'd better go," said Lady Sharp. "I hear a ring outside, and I had rather you did not meet."

But Eric remained rooted to the spot. The shock of the disclosure had rendered him almost powerless to move,

and as steps were heard approaching the door, he felt himself mechanically preparing to spring upon his mother's *fiancé* and throttle him then and there. It was therefore with something like a gasp of disappointment—a feeling experienced far more acutely by the bride-elect—that Eric witnessed as in a dream the entrance, not of his intended step-father, but of Mr. Bawston Mass and Mr. Pound.

"How do you do, Lady Sharp?" said the old banker, shaking hands with his hostess. "Glad to see you looking so well to-day. Allow me to present my friend Mr. Mass, from America—Mr. Bawston Mass, Lady Sharp."

"*Lady* Sharp," said the American gentleman impressively, bowing over her hand.

"Mr. Charteris—Mr. Mass," continued the banker, turning towards Eric.

"*Mister* Charteris," repeated Mr. Mass, in grave acknowledgment. Then they all sat down, and Mr. Pound prepared to make a little speech. "I have to congratulate you, Mr. Charteris," he said. "Your name has been—ahem!—somewhat ill-used lately. Your return to Heathercombe under the circumstances, and in face of the scandal with which you have been so undeservedly connected, does you credit. Allow me to shake hands with you."

Eric, somewhat confused at this unexpected demonstration, complied; and then Mr. Mass rose from his chair,

and solemnly shook hands with him too. Lady Sharp turned almost purple, and an expression of bitter resentment came into her face.

"We have sympathised with you so much in this affair," resumed Mr. Pound, turning to his hostess. "A most scandalous report—shameful to the last degree. The way in which your son has cleared his name must be a source of infinite satisfaction to you, I am sure.'

"You are very good," returned Lady Sharp, distantly.

"You have never visited my country, I think, ma'am?" asked Mr. Mass, by way of beginning a conversation.

"I have not," replied the lady. "You are from Chicago, I believe?"

"Chicago, Denver, Empire City, and Philadelphia—I have locations in all of 'em," said Mr. Mass. "Plenty of room for all of us in the States. And glad to see strangers too. If ever you should cross the herring-pond, ma'am, shall be happy to tote you round—show you the sights, and so on."

"That's a very safe offer," said Lady Sharp, with a forced smile; but her remark sounded so rude that Mr. Pound looked quite uneasy. "I am scarcely likely to go to America. I have a great horror of strangers and strange countries."

"We would be careful not to frighten you, ma'am,"

replied Mr. Mass, with impressive gravity. "I dare say the ladies of your country air somewhat timid out of their own homes. But we make it a rule to take great care of them, and I do not remember any instance in which they have been intentionally damaged while in the States."

Lady Sharp darted an angry glance at the speaker, under the suspicion that he was presuming to make game of her; but the face of Mr. Mass—grave, deliberate, almost melancholy—afforded no corroboration of her thought. A diversion was, however, made by Mr. Pound, who, knowing something of Lady Sharp's peculiarities, engaged her in conversation himself, leaving Mr. Mass to improve his acquaintance with Eric. The good American had taken rather a liking to the youth from the first, and the cordiality he felt was deepened by the unjust accusations which had been so wantonly brought against him; while Eric found amusement and relief in the quaint expressions of his new friend. Any one who had known Mr. Mass in his own country would, on seeing the two together, have augured favourably of Eric's future; for it was undeniable that, were Mr. Mass to take him up, the youth's fortune would be assured, could he only bring himself to cross the ocean. The millionaire, partly divining how things stood between him and his mother, talked racily of life in the United States; told him, with unflinching gravity, droll stories of

his own varied experiences, and dropped a careless hint or two of what might be done by a young Englishman in the New World who should go in for a career there under such auspices as he himself could offer. Eric, outraged by his mother, and with no very attractive prospects immediately before him, listened with keen interest, and made a mental note or two which he thought might prove of service to him afterwards; for the idea of cutting himself adrift from his old life was both new and pleasant to him, and he determined, if need were, to seek the counsel of this rich American, who seemed so very big a "boss" at home.

Just as Mr. Mass was giving Eric a scientific description of the pig-sticking industry for which Chicago is so celebrated, the door of the apartment opened softly, and Lady Sharp was heard to greet another visitor in a somewhat subdued voice. For a moment or two neither he nor Eric interrupted their conversation; Eric, however, was only too conscious who the new-comer was, and an excited flush overspread his face. By the time Mr. Mass had finished what he was saying, a conversation had begun between Mr. Pound and Mr. Leech; at the sound of whose voice Mr. Mass stopped suddenly, cocked his ear with a puzzled look, and then stared straight across the room at the speaker. "By the jumping Jupiter!" he exclaimed under his breath. Eric looked inquiringly at him. "Do you know that

man?" he asked, in a low tone. "Know him!" repeated the American. "We'll see if he knows *me*." Lady Sharp's attention was now attracted, and she began to prepare herself to introduce the gentlemen. But something in the face of Mr. Mass, who had by this time advanced some steps, made her hesitate. Just then the minister himself looked up, and met the eyes of the American gazing full at him.

"Wal, I guessed I couldn't be mistaken," remarked Mr. Mass. "Why, Leech, the world is small, ain't it? Who'd a thought of meeting *you* here, after all these years?"

"I think, Sir, you have the advantage of me," said Mr. Leech, insinuatingly—imploringly, some people might have thought—and in rather an unsteady voice.

"P'raps I have," replied Mr. Mass. "I have a splendid memory, Sir—maybe yours ain't no count. But surelie you remember Bawston Mass! Let's see, now; how long is it since we first met? Must be ten years, I reckon —eh? Down Kentucky way. Yes, ma'am; this gentleman and I air old acquaintances."

"You must be mistaken, I think," said Lady Sharp, her anxiety visibly tempering her reserve. "Mr. Leech is an English gentleman, and was never in America in his life."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," returned Mr. Mass, equably; "he was four years in Philadelphia, and I used to see him nearly every day when I was there myself. What was you

doing then, Leech? Let's see—travellin' for a dry-goods store, wasn't you? Ah! I thought so. Left rather sudden, eh? Wal, I don't blame you. I guess you find this a nicer place than Amurr'ca. So should I, Sir, so should I —situated as you was."

"Is this true?" uttered Lady Sharp, turning with a livid face to the hapless minister, who seemed overwhelmed with confusion. "Were you ever in America?"

"I sojourned in America at one period," stammered Mr. Leech, looking horribly pale. "I did not mention the fact to you, my dear sister; there was no occasion. It was before I entered the ministry, you know; and I stood in great need of this world's goods. I do not like to dwell upon that season. It was a time of trial, a time of sore temptation, and I am thankful for my soul's sake that it was made short."

"How it must have been blessed to you!" said Lady Sharp, as with renewed confidence she recovered her equanimity.

"Yes, I guess he had rayther a hot time of it," pursued Mr. Mass. "I s'pose you hear from Philadelphia now and then, Leech? There's many as remembers you, even now. Heard from your——"

"My dear Sir," interrupted Mr. Leech, with a ghastly smile, "another time, I beg you. We will have a chat

over our former—ahem!—experiences on another occasion. Oblige me, now. Lady Sharp is not interested in such subjects; she is not indeed. Don't you think, now——"

"Why don't you wish this gentleman to refer to your life in America before witnesses?" suddenly asked Eric. The question was like a lightning flash, which leaves one in momentary expectation of the impending thunderbolt. Mr. Pound looked serious and eager, while Lady Sharp's green eyes gleamed with mingled rage and consternation. Then Mr. Mass's voice was heard once more; grave and indifferent as ever.

"You air mistaken, both of you," he said. "I had no intention, when the minister interrupted me, of provoking any discussion upon his antecedents, either in Philadelphia or elsewhere. I was simply going to ask, what any man is at liberty to ask his friend, whether he had heard very lately from his wife."

"What!!!" gasped Lady Sharp; but no one heeded her. The eyes of all of them were turned upon the tortured face of Mr. Leech. A more truly pitiable spectacle than that presented by the wretched man could scarcely be imagined; his colour came and went, and he tried hard to speak, but no sound was audible.

"Because," resumed his executioner, very slowly, "I may be able to give you noos of her, which I think it is

right that you should have. She's very badly off, Leech; she's been nigh starving — she and the three children. P'raps she couldn't afford to write, and that's why you haven't heard. I was told that some Benevolent Society had given her a few needle jobs by way of charity; but I guess she's too far gone for that. I s'pose you'll be goin' back to her some day, eh? Sooner the better, I think, unless she's to starve meanwhile."

The wretched man had bowed his face upon his hands, and now sat swaying his body to and fro, whimpering and sobbing like a child. Eric sprang to his feet, his frame quivering with excitement and his eyes sparkling with vengeful joy. "Oh, you infernal scoundrel!" he shouted. "You hypocrite and liar! so you're exposed at last! Look at him," he continued, addressing the old banker and his friend. "This is the fellow who has been preaching to me, and pestering me with his tracts, and setting my own mother against me for months past. You've no conception of the misery he's caused us all, or the misery and the outrage he's been plotting. I tell you, Mr. Pound——"

"Hush, hush!" said the old banker, who had been much shocked. "Let him leave the house quietly. Your mother needs you—look."

Eric turned his head, and saw Lady Sharp lying on the floor in a dead swoon.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DOOM OF LADY SHARP.

A GREAT stillness had fallen upon Brookfield Hall. Not that it was other than a silent house at any time; but on this night there was something almost unearthly in the oppressive hush. Upstairs lay the unconscious form of Lady Sharp, whither it had been carried by Eric and the two visitors. These gentlemen had then left, in order to procure the attendance of Dr. Urquhart; and it was not until the doctor had arrived, and was engaged in examining his patient, that Edith, ignorant of what had happened, returned home. Eric, bringing her into the dining-room, then told her in a few words all that had occurred. He passed over as briefly as he could the cruel reception he had met with, but laid very considerable emphasis upon the astounding announcement of his mother's projected marriage, which she had made just as the visitors were admitted. I am afraid he dwelt upon the circumstances of Mr. Leech's exposure at the hands of Mr. Mass with rather too keen a relish; but for that my readers will no

doubt forgive him, considering the circumstances. Edith listened with breathless interest, and was naturally much shocked on hearing of her mother's sudden illness.

"Don't go to her just yet," said Eric, as his sister was about to fly upstairs. "Urquhart is with her, and she's got Rebecca. You can't do any good. But only think of it! She was actually engaged to that consummate rascal, and if it hadn't been for Mass, she'd have married him as sure as a gun. I wish you'd been here. The man's face was something to watch—it was a wonderful sight. I don't think I ever saw an expression of such agony on a human countenance before. And then, you know, I went for him. I told him he was an infernal scoundrel, and a liar, and all sorts of things. I'd have throttled him outright if it hadn't been that the mater fainted just at the critical moment."

"It is all wonderful to me," said Edith, drawing a long breath. "And I am deeply thankful that the exposure took place in time. But is mamma very ill? It must have been a fearful shock to her. Poor mamma! O Eric, I must go to her. Hark! what's that?"

"That's Urquhart," said Eric, rising quickly, and going to open the door. "Come in, doctor. How's my mother?"

"Oh, Dr. Urquhart, is mamma very ill? Mayn't I go to her?" cried Edith.

"She has fainted; her system has sustained a shock,"

replied Dr. Urquhart, to whom Mr. Pound had imparted such information as he deemed necessary. "It appears that something happened to upset her this afternoon. I must watch her carefully for a short time, till I see how she is likely to go on."

"You don't mean to say she's in any danger?" asked Edith, anxiously.

"Not at present, that I can see," replied the doctor. "There are no unfavourable symptoms—nothing alarming, I mean. You had better not go up just now. She has a woman with her—Rebecca I think her name is—and I shall come and see her again soon."

"Why not stay and have a bit of dinner with us?" said Eric. "Do—it'll be a charity to us, indeed."

"I hope you will, Dr. Urquhart," said Edith.

"Thanks, I shall be very glad," replied the Doctor. "Indeed, it would be better for me not to go away at once. There may be a change, and——"

"A change!" cried Edith. "That is a dreadful word. I hope, Dr. Urquhart, you are not keeping anything from me?"

"I assure you I am not," said Dr. Urquhart. "Your mother has not yet recovered consciousness, and I have left full instructions with the person attending her how to act meantime. As soon as ever there are signs of returning animation I shall go up again and watch."

With this Edith had to be satisfied, and the three were soon seated comfortably at dinner. And, strange as it may appear considering the circumstances of the meal, it cannot be denied that both Edith and her brother enjoyed it as they had not enjoyed a meal in that house for months. There was no dismal sullen face, no brooding silence, to cast gloom over the party; nor was there any chance of intrusion from the detested visitor who had so very nearly succeeded in usurping a permanent and authoritative position at the board. Edith was dimly sensible of this, and, while thankful for the deliverance, felt sadly shocked at the relief she experienced from her mother's absence. They talked in subdued tones, but not uncheerfully. Dr. Urquhart, observing the girl's pallor and evident anxiety, had prescribed a glass of generous wine; and Eric, acting on the hint, ordered a bottle of champagne. The sparkling fluid did its work; Edith ate with an appetite she had not felt for a long time, and soon found herself listening to the conversation of their friendly guest with a sensation of interest and freedom from restraint which was as new as it was agreeable.

"I say, what a very pleasant fellow that Mr. Bawston Mass is," said Eric, with his mouth full of pie. "Do you know him at all, Urquhart?"

"No," replied the doctor, helping himself to sauce.

"He's a millionaire, isn't he? Pound was telling me about him this morning. He owns a paper, and actually telegraphs leading articles to it from England."

"I shouldn't wonder a bit," said Eric. "He's the most extraordinary man I ever met. He was telling me a lot about the States this afternoon, and what good openings there were there. I wonder how the life would suit me. I've no doubt he'd give me a leg-up if I wanted to make a start."

"O Eric!" cried Edith, quite shocked at such a suggestion. "You don't want to go to America, do you?"

"I haven't thought much about it yet," was Eric's not very encouraging answer. "But a fellow might do worse —especially if he's got such a man as Bawston Mass at his back. What do you think, Urquhart?"

"I have no doubt you might do worse," said the doctor, smiling; "the question is whether you couldn't do better. But of course I don't know anything about it either way. I think that probably the prospect of a new life in a new world would have been very attractive to me when I was your age; but I shouldn't care to leave England now."

"Of course not," assented Eric. "You have your profession, and all that. I haven't, and I think I would like a run over there for a few years immensely. I must try and see old Mass again before he goes away."

"What was that?" said Edith suddenly.

They all listened silently. A long-drawn wail or sigh seemed to be sweeping round the house. Then a heavy door banged violently, and the windows rattled. Edith jumped up in terror.

"It's mamma!" she cried. "Oh, Dr. Urquhart——"

"Nonsense," said Eric. "Don't be such a goose, Edith. It's only a gust of wind. Can't you hear how it blows?"

"It's a storm," observed the doctor, as a deluge of rain dashed itself against the window-panes. "How suddenly it has come on! I'm glad I didn't go home; I should scarcely have been able to come back."

A blinding flash of lightning, followed by a crashing thunder-peal, prevented further conversation. The rain was heard pouring down in torrents, and the wind howled wildly. In the midst of it the quick ear of Dr. Urquhart detected the sound of hurriedly approaching footsteps. Then came a sharp rap at the door, and Rebecca entered without ceremony.

"Oh, Sir," she said, in evident trepidation, "my mistress — there's something queer. She's come to, Sir, but——"

"What is it, Rebecca?" cried Edith, every tinge of colour leaving her cheek. "Let me pass—I must. Is she dying?"

"Keep still," said Dr. Urquhart, detaining her. "I'm going up. Eric, look to your sister. Don't be afraid; I shall soon be down again."

Five minutes passed, in terrible suspense to Edith; ten —fifteen—twenty. No sound was heard overhead; nothing but the rushing rain, the furious wind, and the sullenly retreating claps of thunder. It was an awful night. Edith sat, white and trembling, her terrors intensified by the recollection that thunder had always exercised a most distressing influence upon her mother's nerves, even when in health; so that its effect now, when she was seriously unhinged, might be absolutely fatal. Eric, more philosophical, lighted a cheroot and walked up and down the room. It would be doing him an injustice to say that he did not feel anxious about the stricken woman. He had loved her as a child, and fancied, no doubt, that he loved her still; but the possibility of her death, which crossed his mind ever and anon as he paced the floor, did not strike such anguish into his heart as it might have done had his filial instincts escaped the benumbing pressure of her indifference.

At last the door opened, and Dr. Urquhart entered. He looked very grave. "Your mother is no longer fainting," he said, in answer to their inquiries, "but she requires the most careful watching. Her mind is not clear, and her temperature is high—very high. I am afraid of

brain-fever; but I shall not be able to speak positively about that till to-morrow."

"And what are we to do meantime?" asked Edith, weeping openly.

"You may see her, if you wish, before you go to bed," replied the doctor; "but on no account are you to sit up with her. The woman she has with her will be sufficient for to-night, and to-morrow we must see about getting a proper nurse."

"You'll be here again in the morning?" asked Eric, as the doctor prepared to leave.

"The first thing," was the reply. "Good-night; get to bed as soon as you can, both of you, and have a good night's rest."

So saying, the doctor buttoned up his overcoat, unfurled his umbrella, and was soon bowling swiftly along the wet road in his open chaise. No sooner was his back turned than Edith rushed upstairs. Eric remained quietly in the dining-room, smoking as before. That there was trouble ahead was certain. A bad, dangerous illness, difficult to deal with, and possibly fatal in its results—such was the prospect they had to face. And yet, was not even that better than what had threatened them only that very afternoon? At last he looked at the clock, found it was half-past ten, and decided he would go to bed.

As he passed Edith's door, she came out. "O Eric!" she cried, and broke out weeping afresh. "She doesn't know me, Eric!" she sobbed. "I went in, and found her lying with her eyes open and her poor face crimson. She was talking to herself, muttering and groaning dreadfully; and then, all of a sudden, she laughed! It was fearful. I don't know how Rebecca will bear it the whole night. I never saw anybody like that before. O Eric! suppose she should never get better again! Well, I must try not to be foolish." And so they parted for the night.

The storm had spent itself, and the wind, wearied out, as it were, with its mad gambols, now soughed dolefully among the branches. All was still again in the old house, and an unwonted sensation of eeriness came over Eric, as he found himself, after the exciting scenes of the day, alone in his big bedroom. What a day it had been, to be sure! There was no fire in the grate, otherwise he would have thrown himself into the low soft chair beside it and relapsed into meditation. But there was little inducement to remain out of bed, for the room, comfortably furnished as it was, was large and dingy, and the shadows thrown by the light of the single candle that burnt upon the dressing-table took a threatening and gigantic aspect, filling up the corners of the room with darkness, and shrouding the well-known outlines of the furniture as in a sable veil. There was also

a folding screen, which stood between one side of Eric's bed and the door, sheltering him from draughts. He had always been partial to this screen; but to-night, somehow or other, he wished it were not there. He couldn't bear to have any part of the room hidden from him. Should he fold it up and rest it against the wall? For a moment he thought he would; the next moment he found himself incapable of touching it. A horrible idea came into his head that *there was something behind the screen*, which it would kill him with fright to look upon. Then he shook himself together, threw off his clothes in hot haste, blew out the light, and crept quickly into bed. What could have unnerved him so? Was it Edith's description of their mother—rambling in delirium, burning with disease? It certainly was enough to give any one a turn. But once entrenched between the friendly blankets, Eric grew calmer; and as he lay there, conning over for the fiftieth time the events of that strange afternoon, he soon found himself reverting to his conversation with the American, and pondering seriously whether it would not be wise for him to make a start in that busy, bustling, bright New World of which he had been told. And it occurred to him that such a step need not be dependent upon his mother's life. Whether she lived or whether she died, there was nothing to keep him in England. Yes, he

would consider it; he would go and put the question point-blank to Mr. Mass. And then his train of thought became disconnected, and he found it rather an effort to think at all. He turned over on one side, settled his head comfortably upon his pillow, and in two minutes was asleep.

Not a rustle, not a whisper, disturbed the silence of the night. Once or twice a leaf shivered against the window-pane, but noiselessly. How long Eric slept he knew not. It might have been one hour or three. But there came a moment when he suddenly found himself broad awake. He awoke struggling, as though under the spell of some unseen, awful Presence, so that his body trembled and the sweat stood thick upon his brow. What could be the matter? A ray of moonlight fell, cold and bluish, athwart one corner of his bed. Hark! was it fancy, or did he hear the faintest, slightest movement in the room? No; all was silent—horribly silent. Eric lay, leaning on his elbow, staring in all the agony of terror at the screen. *It moved.* Again that stealthy, muffled sound, which yet was no sound, and with it the fearful consciousness that there was Something near him,—a Something he could not see. Again the screen trembled; this time, that part of it which surrounded the corner of his bed at the foot. Then a shadow fell across the ray of moonlight, and the next

moment a pair of spectral eyes were gleaming at him through the darkness.

It was an awful hag—livid of colour, unearthly in expression—who stood revealed before him. The lips, drawn convulsively apart and of a purple hue, showed the clenched teeth; the hair, thick and greyish, fell in disorder over the distorted face; the figure was crouching, as though for concealment; and in its right hand there was clutched something that shimmered faintly in the moonbeams.

"Lost!" it whispered; and the whisper, in the silence of that room, sounded like a shriek. "Lost—eternally! He said he would save me. I could not fall—with him. Now they've taken him away, and I must go to the fire, and the brimstone, and the worm. Is this the Second Death? *You* did it—yes, *you!* Come, let us pray. It is the Day of Judgment. No hope, no hope, no hope!"

With a cry of horror—horror which would have cost him his reason had he not shrieked and thus destroyed the spell—Eric leaped from his bed and grasped the shoulders of the maniac. She, uttering a low snarl, sprang back, and struck at him with the knife she held. Quick as thought, he eluded the full force of the blow, which only grazed his neck, and, dashing aside the screen, made for the door. He was but just in time. He sped along the corridor to his mother's room, and pounced upon the

unconscious Rebecca, who was fast asleep in an arm-chair. "Hush!" he whispered. "She is walking in her sleep. Come and help me bring her back." The bewildered woman, gasping out apologies and incoherent expressions of alarm, rushed back with him to his bedroom. "I'm afraid she may be violent," he said, in an undertone. "Try and not wake my sister."

There was no danger. They found her, calm now and tractable, sobbing on her knees by the empty bed. "Mother!" cried Eric softly, his own eyes full of tears. "Come, mother; it is I—Eric. You have been dreaming. Let Rebecca take you back to bed."

She rose, the poor demented soul, and suffered herself to be led away. The paroxysm had passed off, and left her weak and helpless. Eric, seeing that there was no immediate risk of a further outbreak, and thoroughly unnerved by the horror of the scene he had gone through, struck a light and partly dressed himself. It was near dawn, and any more sleep was of course an impossibility. He therefore hastily wrapped himself in an ulster, put on a travelling-cap, and, slipping downstairs, let himself out at the front-door. The air was chilly, and thin, fleecy clouds were scudding silently across the face of the moon. The relief to him was almost like a change from hell to heaven; and as he walked up and down in front of the house, with

the cool, damp breeze fanning his face, he gradually recovered his composure, and was able to bend his thoughts upon what lay before him. That his mother's terrible seizure must at all hazards be concealed from Edith, appeared to him of the very first importance; at present, at any rate, he could not tell whether it was delirium or insanity, and he was impatient to lay the whole story before Dr. Urquhart, in order to learn the worst. Slowly the time went by as he paced the wet road, and anxiously he looked up, every now and then, at the window of the room where the patient lay and the nurse no longer slept. Everything was quiet; and at last the strange, sad vigil came to an end. The moonlight faded, the day broke clear and calm, and the fearful night was swallowed up in the cheerful radiance of the blessed sunrise.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MR. INSIGHT'S STORY.

Naomi had now been missing for more than a fortnight, and no tidings of her had reached Tresham. It is true that he had received several communications from the detectives at Westhampton, but the results of their investigations had hitherto been negative. It was proved, almost beyond the possibility of doubt, that no one answering to the description of the lost girl had travelled up to London on the day when she disappeared. Guards and station-masters and porters had all been questioned upon this point, and were all unanimous. Nor could any fly-driver or cabman be found who acknowledged having driven a young lady at all resembling Miss Insight in any direction whatever on that particular afternoon. Indeed, there was no evidence to prove that Naomi had ever left Heathercombe at all; a fact, however, which was quite compatible with the apparent certainty that, whether she had left it or not, she was no longer in it. The detectives, in short, were baffled, though they put as good a face upon it as they

could. Not being able to find out where Naomi was, they made much of having discovered a great many places where she was not; and this, with professional acuteness, they called narrowing the area of their pursuit.

A settled gloom, meanwhile, darkened the once bright and cheerful face of Tresham. He had resumed his duties, and performed them conscientiously; but the wine of life had been dashed from his lips, and he found it impossible to feel that active, practical interest in his work that was formerly habitual to him. The serious illness of Lady Sharp from brain fever—no secret now in Heathercombe—moved him with a cold, distant pity. Had he not been suffering acutely himself, he would have had a warmer feeling for the woman who had persecuted him, and have forgotten all resentment in genuine compassion for her in her tribulation; but his own anguish made him self-centred, and he grew almost callous to the troubles of others. Dr. Urquhart, shrewd and observant, noticed the change that had come over him; but, while he regretted his friend's sullen demeanour, he had the fine tact to affect entire unconsciousness of it, contenting himself with occasional calls, during which he chatted as unconcernedly as usual. He felt anxious, however, to turn Tresham's thoughts into a healthier channel; and he was therefore glad when the condition of Mr. Insight had so far improved as to enable

him to see a friend or two. Urquhart lost no time in apprising Tresham of the fact, and Tresham, yearning for a conversation with the old man, lost no time in availing himself of the opportunity.

The little room looked neat and cheerful as Tresham, with a fast-beating heart, entered it after his two weeks' banishment. The magic of a woman's touch had done wonders; every trace of untidiness had disappeared, and the Sister of Charity, as she sat reading her breviary by the fireside, was betrayed into something like an amused smile at the startled glance of *le jeune révérend*. Mr. Insight lay propped up on high pillows, his large, bright eyes looking larger and brighter by contrast with his hollow cheeks and shattered appearance, an expression of weariness and anxiety on his drawn face, but, as Urquhart had said, with renewed health gradually asserting its sway. The two clasped hands silently. Then Tresham sat down by the bedside and began to speak.

"You can talk a little now, can't you?" he said nervously, not feeling very sure of his ground.

"A little," said the old minister, speaking with an effort, yet distinctly enough to be understood. "I'm getting along famously. Ah! a sad time—a sad time!"

"Of course you know we've heard nothing yet?" said Tresham.

Mr. Insight raised his hand and let it fall again without speaking.

"We've done all we could," continued Tresham, in a low voice. "The detectives seem hopelessly at fault. There is only one little fact that has come to my knowledge since. When she left your house, she met Eric Charteris by appointment, and walked with him for nearly two hours. Charteris told me of this himself. He knew he had acted wrongly, and was quite frank about it. They parted at about a quarter to seven, and he went up to London. He has no idea what became of her after that."

"That's very strange," said the old man, thoughtfully.

Tresham sat silent for a few seconds, and then, with a visible effort, resumed. "I don't know what you'll think of what I'm going to say," he went on, hesitatingly. "But you must remember that I know very little of Naomi's history; and it strikes me that there may be something in it that might afford a clue, not only to her disappearance, but also to much that has puzzled me in her conduct for weeks and months past. I don't want you to tell me anything of a private nature, but I should like to know something, at least, of her life and surroundings before she came to Heathercombe. Don't you think you could enlighten me a little on this point?"

Mr. Insight looked just a little embarrassed at this sug-

gestion. "I don't know, I'm sure," he said, abstractedly. "There's very little to tell—very little. Yet there's no reason why I should conceal anything from you. Yes, you're justified in asking. I will tell you all I know."

Then he fell into a reverie, casting about in his mind how he should begin. He still spoke with difficulty, and his utterance was not very clear; at last, however, he seemed to gather courage, and began to speak with the air of one who had made up his mind to the performance of a painful duty.

"You are opening up a sad chapter in my life," he began, with an expression of some distress. "I am nearly sixty-four, and I lived till I was over forty an unmarried man. You have never heard me speak of my wife. Well, well—we were not happy; let that suffice. She was of a gay, self-willed temperament, and we were never suited to each other. How could we be? She was a public singer, Tresham; a good woman in her way—pure and faithful to me throughout; but, alas! quite unfitted to be the wife of an obscure Dissenting minister. How she ever came to marry me I cannot think; we must both have been hopelessly infatuated. The result was inevitable, and came speedily. It so happened that, after we had spent three years of bitterness, she received a small legacy from the death of a relative; for she was respectably connected, and

never need have embraced the life she did. The unexpected provision enabled us to separate. She left me, and went to live on the Continent, taking our child with her. I have often thought it was cruel of her to deprive me of my little girl; but I knew she would be safe with her mother, and would, moreover, have greater advantages in the way of education than I could ever have afforded her. It was this consideration, and this only, that led me to consent to such an arrangement. My wife wrote to me twice a year. Nearly all the proceeds of her small income were spent on the child's schooling, while she eked out her livelihood by public singing and giving lessons in music and the English language."

Mr. Insight paused, passing his hand over his thin locks as though exhausted. Tresham got him a cup of tea, which he drank eagerly. Then he resumed his story.

"The child, meanwhile, was brought up without any knowledge of her father. She was allowed to write to me occasionally, but had evidently never been taught to care for me. A year ago her mother died, and there was then no reason why we should be separated any longer. I allowed her to stay at Frankfort a few months, and then insisted on her coming to her natural home with me. What followed of course you know. I think she was disappointed at the humbleness of my position and the comparative dulness of

her life here. We were, naturally, strangers to each other; all her notions were strongly tinged with her Continental associations; she seemed, almost from the first, restless, nervous, and excitable; and her evident dissatisfaction made me seriously uneasy. I foresaw that she would never settle down happily to an English life, and that she was not suited to the discharge of domestic duties. Then came your offer of marriage, and her hesitating acceptance. It seemed to me only too clear that she was going to marry you simply to escape from a life with me that was irksome to her. I felt sure that you would be grievously disappointed after the marriage had taken place, and that she would never make you happy. It was for this reason I opposed the match, and only consented very reluctantly when I found you were bent upon it."

"It's a sad story," said Tresham, as Mr. Insight paused again for breath. "I cannot bear to think of your spoilt life, deprived of both wife and child. You have indeed been severely tried."

"It was my cross," replied the old man, simply. "At times it was very heavy, but I had strength to bear it. I have often thought that one never knows what weight one *can* bear till it is actually laid upon our shoulders. I was happy enough at first; all my sorrows came upon me with my marriage,—the very step I hoped would ensure my

happiness for life. Ah! my friend, how often do the fruits we covet turn to ashes in our mouth!"

Tresham leant his head upon his hand, sadly pondering the words of the elder man. What he said was most profoundly true—true not only of himself in his relations to his dead wife, but true of him, the younger man, who had been, and still was, so anxious to imitate his example. Were not the words a warning? and might not the event he was deploring as a bitter and undeserved calamity turn out the truest blessing in disguise?

"Tell me one thing more," he said, in a choking voice. "What was the name of the lady with whom Naomi was living as a pupil teacher?"

"It was a Fraulein Plänckner," replied the minister.

Tresham caught his breath. So much, then, was true. He thought a moment, and then proceeded—

"Did they get on well together?"

"They were on the most affectionate terms," said Mr. Insight, with some emphasis. "Fräulein Plänckner was wont to write to me in the highest terms of Naomi, whom she professed to love dearly. She praised her amiability, her diligence, her unselfishness; and said that if she had no other virtues, she would always love her for the extreme tenderness she invariably showed towards the younger children."

Tresham listened eagerly. How strange that *that* should have been a distinguishing feature of her character, and how grievously he had maligned her by the suspicions which Ricochet's communication had now dispelled!

"Indeed," continued Mr. Insight, "the good soul was exceedingly unwilling to part with her; and I was positively obliged to write almost peremptorily to her before she would consent to let Naomi return."

"And do you think Naomi reciprocated the schoolmistress's affection?" inquired Tresham.

"She seemed to do so in her letters," replied Mr. Insight; "but I had my doubts about it afterwards. And then a circumstance occurred which puzzled me very sorely. You remember that morning you came in about nine o'clock, and had a conversation with Naomi about your marriage; and you remember what strange emotion she showed when——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Tresham, "I remember. Well?"

"It was on that morning," resumed Mr. Insight, "that she received a letter which seemed to cause her terrible uneasiness. She turned as pale as ashes when she read it, and was unable to finish her breakfast. At first she evaded my questions; but I discovered subsequently that the letter was from her old schoolmistress, who had written, in the kindest and most cordial terms, announcing a probable

visit to England some time during the next few weeks. I knew not then, nor can I imagine now, why this should have had so disturbing an effect on Naomi; but of the fact there can be no question. I suppose it is all part of the same mystery."

Again Tresham relapsed into silent thought, trying to pick his way through the tangled maze of conflicting circumstances. Then he said—

"Had Naomi no other friends in Frankfort? Did she never speak of any of her schoolfellows, for instance?"

"No, I think not," replied Mr. Insight, hesitatingly; "except once or twice in the few letters she wrote me after her mother's death. She may have known some people in the town—I don't remember. And she referred once or twice to a girl who had got rather intimate with her at Fräulein Plänckner's, but who turned out badly, and was expelled, and afterwards died in Brussels. I cannot call to mind any others."

"Do you remember the name of the girl who was expelled, and what her fault was?" asked Tresham, quickly.

"There was some intrigue, I believe," said the old minister, who was fast becoming very tired. "I know very little about it, except that it was a rather disreputable affair, and for the sake of her school Fräulein Plänckner had to

get rid of the offender. Her name—so Naomi wrote me at the time—was Helen Jarvis."

This tallied with what Ricochet's friend had written to him from Frankfort, and might or might not have an important bearing on the case. Mr. Insight evidently knew no more, and Tresham saw that he had already taxed his strength to the utmost. Indeed, the Sister of Charity now approached, and forbad further conversation; there was a flush upon the patient's cheeks which warned her that rest was now necessary for him after his unwonted exertion, and she told Tresham that it would be better that he should retire. Tresham accordingly took his leave; and that night he sat up far into the small hours, thinking deeply over all that the old minister had said. There was abundant food for reflection; the question was, how much of what he had heard was calculated to elucidate the mystery that was oppressing him. For a short time he almost laid aside the project of finding Naomi. First and foremost it devolved upon him to solve the mystery of her life.

CHAPTER XXV.

RETROSPECTIVE AND PARENTHETICAL.

No sooner, then, had the mystery of Naomi Insight's disappearance begun to pall upon the gossips of Heathercombe than fresh sensations were provided. The midnight outbreak of Lady Sharp had, it is true, been preserved a secret. No one knew of it save Eric, Dr. Urquhart, and Rebecca; and the only one of these at all likely to reveal it was naturally constrained to silence by the simple consideration that it had happened through her own negligence. But, as we have seen, it was no secret that the mistress of Brookfield Hall was seriously ill with brain-fever; and there were not wanting those who were shrewd enough to connect her seizure with the sudden unmasking of the villainy of Mr. Leech. It was not known that the minister had actually proposed marriage to Lady Sharp. His constant presence in her house, however, and the excessive intimacy of his relations with her, not only as her pastor but as her friend, had not escaped notice; and while no one even suspected the true state of the case, it was

generally believed that the shock of the *exposé* had contributed to the illness which was now assuming so very serious an aspect. As for Mr. Leech, his day was over. It was impossible to conceal the fact that he, a married man, had been for years masquerading as a bachelor; that he had ruthlessly and deliberately deserted his wife and children, and that they had been on the brink of starving through his neglect. At first the Little Hill was loyal to him. His congregation pooh-poohed the charge with indignation, and refused to depedestalise their trusted minister on the bare assertion of an unregenerate American adventurer, of whom nobody knew anything. Bethabara talked of presenting a formal assurance of its Christian sympathy and confidence, and even mooted the idea of a handsome testimonial, to be subscribed for jointly with the Little Hill, if the latter congregation thought fit to initiate such a step. But when the Rev. Israel Doom went, in the fulness of his Christian love, to support his calumniated brother, he found his lodgings empty. Three days had passed since the scene in Lady Sharp's dining-room, and the story had only just become public property. The miserable man had meantime stolen a march upon the inevitable, and the night after his exposure, before the affair had leaked out, he had packed up such valuables as he possessed, and taken a third-class single ticket by the

up-train. It is said there were a few tradesmen who had cause to regret the suddenness of his departure; but on the whole, his loss to the town was not a serious one. And as he passed away from Heathercombe, so he now passes from this book. Let us hope that he went back to Philadelphia and helped to support his wife.

And now, having reached this stage in our narrative, let us pause for a moment and consider quietly the position of affairs. No fewer than three persons—two of whom are worthy of affection, or at least good-will—have undergone the ruin of their lives through the fatal influence of love. When Tresham came to Heathercombe he was a happy man. Of a cheerful disposition, energetic, fond of hard work, and devoted to his calling, he was cordially esteemed by those to whom he ministered, and personally liked by all but a few fanatics. Suddenly a spell came over him—a spell exercised by an inferior and underbred woman—and from that moment he was lost. A few weeks were spent in a fool's paradise; then the girl who had enslaved him suddenly disappeared, and he was now a soured, melancholy man, deprived of the fetish he had worshipped, absorbed in his own woes, and almost indifferent to the sufferings he had once been so prompt and eager to alleviate. And the very woman who had proved his curse was the daughter of another woman who had proved a similar curse to as good

a man. It was indeed, as Mr. Insight had confessed, an "infatuation" on his part when he had married the singing-woman; but such infatuations may scarcely be resisted, and the price he had had to pay was the sorrow of a blighted life and the deprivation of his only child. And shall we have no sympathy for Lady Sharp? I think her case was the hardest of the three. A victim to religious monomania of the acutest and most distressing kind, she, more than any one, required the comfort, the counsel, and the affection of a pure-hearted and true man. She had set her love upon a knave, had staked her all, even to the salvation of her soul, upon the constancy, the saintliness, the spiritual strength of a very poor dissembler; the staff upon which she leant had cruelly pierced her hand, and the agony had turned her brain. In his days of loneliness and depression, our poor young parson used to moralise over such thoughts as these; and he would recall, with a sort of bitter self-ridicule, the words of scorn he had been wont to use about falling in love and love-making; and he would think how true it all was, how right he had been, and of what fearful folly he had been guilty in allowing himself to become an example of the very mania he had pitied and condemned in others. Oh, for his former independence, his heart-wholeness, his freedom from this baleful thrall! The wish startled him as soon as it was formed. Could it be a sign

that he would rather be set free from his passion than find the object of it?

"Well, well! wonders will never cease," exclaimed Miss Ashe, as she came bustling into the Duchess's sitting-room one afternoon with a more than usually glowing face. "Such news, your Grace! And worse to follow, unless I'm very much mistaken, which I seldom am. What do you think, Duchess? There's that——"

"Now you be careful what you're about, Margaret Ashe," snapped the Duchess, who seemed to be in rather a crusty humour. "Seldom mistaken, indeed! What about that wicked rigmarole you sent all over the town about Eric Charteris? I tell you what it is, Margaret Ashe; you'll find yourself in hot water one of these fine days. You pick up a word here and a word there, and then you patch them into a story without a thought as to whether it's true or false, and tell it to every one you meet. Lor, I could have smacked you when I heard about pore Eric!" cried her Grace, shaking her treble chin and glaring at Miss Ashe over her spectacles. "So you be careful, mind. What is it you've got in your head to-day?"

"Really, Duchess!" exclaimed the astounded lady faintly, as she sank into a chair, "your Grace is positively cruel to me. Is it my fault if people make assignations with each other and then disappear from the face of the globe?

No one was more truly rejoiced than I was when the young man came back, I'm sure. And nothing could have looked blacker," protested the aggrieved lady, beginning to sniff and wipe her eyes. "Everybody said it was very black—very black and suspicious indeed. I'm sure I was under the impression that even your Grace——"

"There, there, that's enough," interrupted the Duchess. "Never mind whether it was black or blue. What is it you've heard now? That unfortunate girl hasn't come to life again, has she?"

"Not that I've heard tell," replied Miss Ashe, trying to put on a little show of dignity, now that the Duchess was appeased. "What I was going to say was about poor Lady Sharp."

"Dirty grub!" interjected the Duchess.

"Her ladyship is very ill," resumed Miss Ashe, with as much stiffness as she could command; "they do say she's quite off her head. Brain-fever, I'm told; and that violent there's no 'olding of her. Not that *I*'m surprised," she continued with returning good-humour, as she warmed to her subject and the Duchess listened with more interest, "for I'm sure the trouble she's 'ad of late with one thing and another might have turned the head of the wisest of us. First there was Mr. Tresham's affair, and then all that trouble about her son—which was *not* all my fault, Duchess, for

others believed it just as much; and now all these dreadful things people are saying about that poor Mr. Leech—such a good man, I'm sure, and such a support to dear Lady Sharp, though his views *are* peculiar I dare say; but then, as I say, who's to judge? And now that Lady Sharp's so ill and out of 'er wits, there's no one to defend him, and only that American man that's been raking up scandals. Well, there's more things in heaven and earth, you know, and after all, one can never tell. But if all one hears is true——"

"What are you chattering about?" interrupted the Duchess, with a touch of her former impatience. "What's the matter with Mr. Leech, and what have his views got to do with Lady Sharp's illness?"

"It's the American," answered Miss Ashe, indignantly, "that Mr. Mass, as he calls himself, from Buffalo, or some such place. He says Mr. Leech used to live in America, and that he's got a wife there, and a host of children, and they've nothing to keep themselves on; I suppose he means he's deserted them, and it's dreadful to think such wicked scandals are raked up and sent floating all over the town. Poor Mr. Leech! I'm sure I had a most edifying conversation with him some days ago. Ah! how little we thought what was in store!"

"Wicked scandals?" repeated the Duchess, with grim

humour. "Well, Margaret Ashe, I'm glad to hear you don't approve of scandalmongering any more than I do, and I only hope you'll not encourage it. But if this gentleman says he knew the man in America, and knows that he has a wife and family, I shouldn't be a bit surprised if it were true. What do *you* know about him, pray?"

"Oh, Duchess!" exclaimed Miss Ashe, in deprecating amazement. "Now that is *not* like you. You are always so charitable; and now you are quite ready to believe this shocking story about that poor dear man. Of course he won't retaliate upon Mr. Mass. He will turn the other cheek—you'll see if he won't turn the other cheek, Duchess. Besides, how *could* he do anything? The poor man can't prove that he *hasn't* a wife and children in America! No more could anybody. In fact, we're all at anybody's mercy. Suppose some wicked, malicious wretch were to accuse me, for instance, of having a husband at the North Pole; how could I prove I hadn't? Of course you may say that *I'm* above suspicion; but surely, surely——"

"Ho, ho, ho!" shouted the Duchess in her glee. "Yes, Margaret Ashe, you're safe enough. I don't think anybody's likely to accuse you of having a husband hidden away. But don't you be too sure about that man. I've never liked him since I found him in the pickle-closet. Lor, if only I could have locked him in!"

The remembrance of the famous episode in which Mr. Leech had played so humiliating a part turned the Duchess's attention for a minute from the subject of his matrimonial delinquencies, and she chuckled jovially to herself as she rehearsed the scene again in her own mind. Just at that moment a ring was heard at the front-door bell, and Miss Heath walked into the room.

"How d'ye do, middair?" said the Duchess, presenting her spacious cheek to the new-comer. "So glad to see you, Beatrice. Here's Margaret Ashe full of stories as usual, and I can't make out how much I ought to believe. What's this I hear of that minister-man?"

"It appears he deserted his wife and children in Philadelphia," returned Miss Heath. "The American knew him there. He was a commercial traveller at the time, and was suddenly dismissed by his employers. Of course nobody knows what for. I believe the scene at Lady Sharp's when he was confronted by Mr. Mass was something wonderful."

"And you too believe this wicked calumny?" cried Miss Ashe, in despair. "Never mind! I'm *convinced* he'll clear himself. See if I'm not right, now. Why, if that's all, I'll go and ask him myself. Married, indeed! Don't tell me. I'll ask him point-blank for authority to deny it; and then you'll see how the whole scandal will explode."

"I'm afraid you're undertaking more than you can perform, Miss Ashe," said Beatrice, good-humouredly. "Mr. Leech is apparently quite indifferent to both your opinion and mine, for he's gone away—bolted, I believe, is the word. I'm afraid there is no doubt of his guilt."

"Bolted, has he?" said the Duchess. "What have you got to say to that, Margaret Ashe? I suppose you'll go after him, and tell him how sorry you are he didn't give you authority to speak for him before he went! You always were a goose, Margaret, and a goose you will always be."

Poor Miss Ashe looked very crestfallen; she always dreaded the Duchess's banter, and just now she felt particularly crushed. She sat, flushed and deprecating, with her face contorted into an uneasy smile, while Beatrice gave the Duchess an account of a visit she had paid to Edith at Brookfield Hall. Lady Sharp, it appeared, was in a most critical condition; and there seemed reason to fear that, whether she recovered her health or no, she would never recover her mind. While there, Miss Heath had encountered Dr. Urquhart, who, though very reticent about her ladyship, had given an excellent account of the Independent minister—a piece of news at which the Duchess was sincerely pleased. As for Eric, he seemed to have America on the brain; and it certainly appeared

very likely that he would eventually cross the Atlantic in search of a career. But of course nothing would be decided as long as uncertainty prevailed about his mother's life; and there was, besides, Edith to be taken into account. A little flush came over Miss Heath's face as she said this, and a significant look was in her eyes, as though there was something she might have said but didn't; and the impression it gave the shrewd old Duchess was that perhaps Madam Edith would find herself very well taken care of, independently of Eric, when the time should come. "Oho!" thought her Grace. "I wonder who it is, now." The fact was that there wasn't anybody just then; but it is undeniable that one of our friends had long made up his mind that Edith, and no other, should be his wife. And it is possible, of course, that Beatrice may have observed what appeared to her premonitory symptoms during her brief visit.

"Well, it has been a month of marvels hitherto," remarked the Duchess, as she resumed her knitting. "Have you heard anything of that poor Mr. Tresham?"

"He officiated in church last Sunday," replied Beatrice, "but he looks dreadfully ill. And he can't preach a bit now. His sermon was the poorest and driest composition I ever listened to. I do wish for his sake that they could find that girl."

"And I wish he'd never set eyes on her!" exclaimed the Duchess, shaking her head portentously. "I always thought it was a foolish business. And that pore old fellow, too, lying there paralysed. Ugh! I hate women, that I do. Half the mischief that's done in the world is done by them. If they were all like you and me, now, middair——"

"Thanks, Duchess," laughed Beatrice. "If your Grace had been in Paradise, Adam would never have been tempted to eat the apple. I'm afraid we're a mischievous lot. But now I must really be off. Are you going my way, Miss Ashe?"

Miss Ashe was only too glad to escape, and the two rose to leave. "Don't forget to let me know anything you hear," cried the Duchess after them, as they departed. Miss Ashe was still too much offended to reply, but Beatrice gave the required promise cheerfully. Not one of the three had any idea how much there would be to tell within the next few hours—how much, indeed, was taking place within a few miles of them at that very time.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

"TRESHAM, I have news for you."

The young man was sitting in his study, moodily smoking a pipe. He looked weary and haggard, worn out with suspense and grief; years older, indeed, than when first we met him. He had been thinking very deeply for some days about the story told him by Mr. Insight, and had bent his mind towards the discovery, were that possible, of the secret of Naomi's life; but his cogitations had been fruitless, or had resulted, at most, in the conclusion that Naomi had simply sickened at the idea of life in a dull town, and had thereupon run back to Germany. But it was impossible to accept such a theory as final. He could not admit the conviction that she, whom he loved so intensely, could care for him so little, or that a girl who had been the favourite and honoured pupil of a good woman could act so heartlessly, so wickedly, to her father and himself. And yet——

It was just as his thoughts reached this point that the

above words fell, sharply and suddenly, upon his ear. "News!" He started up as though he had been shot, pale and breathless. It was Dr. Urquhart.

"Sit down," said the doctor, gravely. "I have something important to tell you."

Tresham sank into the nearest chair. "What is it?" he gasped. "Is she found?"

"My news is not good," replied Dr. Urquhart, looking very serious. "But at any rate it will put an end to your suspense. She is found."

"Thank God!" breathed Tresham, in a low voice.

"But she is very ill," continued the doctor. "It would be cruel of me to hold out any hopes of her recovery. I fear you must make up your mind to that," he said, in a tone there was no mistaking. "She has been ill for weeks, and, in spite of every care and treatment, she cannot last much longer. It is necessary that I should tell you this."

The room seemed to go round and round, and for a second or two Tresham could scarcely persuade himself he was not dreaming. At last he managed to say—

"But where is she? Mayn't I go and see her?"

"You may do so," replied Dr. Urquhart. "Indeed she is most anxious to see and speak with you; and I think the sooner you go the better. If you will come with me, I will drive you over there immediately."

Tresham, trembling with excitement, seized his hat. "But where is she?" he repeated. "Where has she been all this time? Not *here*—in Heathercombe?"

"She has been at St. Gertrude's Oratory," said Dr. Urquhart.

* * * * * *

The evening light was fading slowly, and there was a deep stillness in the little room where the lost girl, now so strangely found, lay dying. By her bedside sat Tresham, his face buried in his hands; at the window stood Dr. Urquhart, looking sad and stern. It had been a marvellous reunion. There was silence now, broken only by the ticking of the little clock over the fireplace, and an occasional sigh from the dying girl. At last she moved uneasily, and turned her eyes towards Tresham.

"Arthur," she said, faintly.

Tresham put out his hand, and pressed hers closely. "My darling!" he whispered.

"I've so much to say to you," she said. "I haven't much strength left, but I'm not in pain just now. Will you listen to me? Dr. Urquhart, you must come here too. There—on that chair. I want you both to hear what I have to say."

Urquhart took the seat she pointed out, and waited silently.

"You want to know how I disappeared," she continued. "Ah! it's a long story." Then she paused, as though in doubt how she should begin. "I know I've caused you dreadful anxiety," she went on, in rather a firmer tone. "But don't you remember, Arthur, how I warned you not to marry me? It's all for the best, believe me. You'll be glad of it when you know everything."

"Don't talk like that," said Tresham, huskily.

"You've heard that I was at a school in Frankfort," she continued, gazing steadily in front of her. "It was kept by a Fräulein Plänckner, and was my only home for years. They treated me well enough. At first I was a parlour boarder, as it's called, and had more liberty than the rest of the girls. Perhaps I had too much. About a year ago I got into some trouble, and from that time I was watched more strictly. The Fräulein kept a sharp eye on me, and the girls—well, I suppose the girls never liked me very much. They were all better off than I was, for they, at any rate, had homes to go to, whereas I spent all my holidays at school. There was only one among them who was kind to me. She was the Fräulein's favourite, and though favourites aren't generally popular, she was. Even I liked her. Her name was—Naomi Insight."

"*What!*" gasped Tresham, petrified.

"She was said to be the daughter of an English clergy-

man," continued the girl, in a hard, set voice. "I was only the daughter of a degraded Jew. My father's name was Reuben Jozadak, and he was a money-lender. He was repudiated by the other Jews because he married a Gentile woman; they persecuted him and cursed him. Then he changed his name to Jarvis, and gave up his religion altogether. When my mother died, he sent me to the school at Frankfort, paying my terms every quarter, but never coming to see me. He sank very low at last, I believe, and then the remittances fell off. I've never heard of him since.

"About this time I met an Englishman. He was an officer, and he began to pay me attention. I suppose it was very wrong. I only know I was a friendless girl, whom nobody seemed to care for, and he swore he was in love with me. I saw him whenever I had a chance, and we corresponded. At last he made me consent to marry him. It was to be a private marriage, because he had nothing but his pay, and was afraid of offending his father. What could I expect more? I got leave to take a walk one afternoon, and met him at a place he had appointed. There was a Lutheran minister waiting for us, and we were married secretly."

"Who was the man?" asked Tresham, in sudden anger.

"That I can never tell you," replied Helen Jarvis, sadly. "He was kind to me, and I thought I loved him. But we

were very seldom together afterwards, and days and days would pass, sometimes, without our meeting. We could do nothing but wait for better times, and weary work it was, for our prospects were dark enough. The only consolation we had was in corresponding, but even this was a matter of some difficulty, for of course if the schoolmistress had found it out, I should have been expelled on the spot. Four times a week I was allowed an hour to myself, and I used to spend the time walking up and down a certain avenue in hopes that he would come. But he was not much freer than I was, and it often happened that we never met—for he had to be constantly on his guard lest our connection should be discovered.

"Well, things went on like this for three or four months, till a certain day, when I was sitting by myself under the trees in the avenue. I had been quite alone there for some time, when I saw somebody come and take a seat at the other end of the bench. I just glanced at him, and found it was a boy of eighteen or thereabouts, dark and rather handsome. He sat for some time in silence, but at last, somehow or other, we got into conversation. I don't remember what we talked about, but he interested me rather, and I found talking to him livelier than sitting all by myself waiting for somebody who never came. He said he had been in Italy, and was only in Frankfort for a

few weeks, and had no acquaintances. Gradually we got on almost a friendly footing, and met again—but quite by accident as far as I was concerned. On one occasion I happened to tell him that I was half a Jewess by birth. 'Are you a Jewess by religion?' he asked. I laughed, not very merrily, at the idea of my having any religion at all. 'Well,' he said, 'that's very strange, now; I'm a Jew by descent, but I'm a Roman Catholic by religion.' Then I looked closer at him, and detected several signs of Jewish blood about him which Gentiles don't generally recognise. This led to something like friendship between us, and when next I met my husband, I don't know how it was, but I shrank from telling him about the Jew boy.

"At last something happened that brought matters to a crisis. The boy began to presume. He adopted a sentimental style of talk, and assured me that he loved me—loved me—but alas! we could never be married, because he was a Roman Catholic and I had been brought up a Protestant. Yet he was rich, or would soon be, and if only—but I needn't tell you all he said. I was very weak, and one day he went so far as to kiss me. His importunities were incessant, and I—well, let that rest, too. But a sense of the frightful risk I was running made me throw away all other considerations, and I told him at last that I was a married woman. I told him how I was situated, how

the ceremony was performed, everything except the name of my husband. He, with devilish cunning, replied that my marriage was not legal; and tried to persuade me that, considering the circumstances in which I was placed, the inability of my supposed husband to support me or acknowledge me, and the unlikelihood that he would consent to go through another ceremony, the only course open to me was to throw myself on *his* protection. I told him he was a little fiend, forbad him to speak to me any more, and rushed back to the school as fast as my feet could carry me. The thought of the husband I had wronged surged up in my heart, and I stopped at the post-office on my way to see if there was a letter for me. There was—and oh, such a letter! He wrote to say he had been suddenly called away by the illness of his mother, and was leaving for St. Petersburg next morning. This drove me nearly frantic. I locked myself up in my room and wrote to him. I told him of the danger I was in, of the compromising nature of my position—a wife and yet not a wife—and implored him to hold out some hope of arrangements for the future. Then I got one of the children to take it. She was a stupid little thing, and I used to have some difficulty in making her do errands of the sort for me, but there had been no help, and what with coaxing and threatening, I generally managed to get her to do what I wanted. It

was past nine o'clock, when they were all supposed to be in bed, and it was easy enough for me to let her out at the back-door, for it was a great rambling house, with no end of passages and staircases. The child got back safely, but for the first time she had been missed. This brought matters to a climax, and I was then and there expelled.

"I had no time even to think. The idea of going to join my husband at St. Petersburg was out of the question. It would have been impossible for me to do so, for his father and mother were both there, and detection would have ruined us. I therefore decided to go to Brussels. I had saved money, and had about twenty pounds or thereabouts, and I thought I might eke out a living by getting a situation in some shop, or even by mending lace. I used to be rather clever at that once upon a time. I was lucky enough to find a cheap lodging—a wretched garret it was, but still it was a roof over my head. Then I tried to get work. It was no use. Nobody would have me—nobody knew me—nobody wanted me. Can you blame me if once or twice I found myself thinking of the young Jew boy who had tempted me? But I had no means of going back to Frankfort, even if I could have made up my mind to it. And I never heard from my husband once.

"Then a thought flashed over me. I had still a little money left, and it occurred to me that I might clear up

the doubts which that little fiend had suggested to me. I went to a lawyer, and told him all the circumstances of my marriage. Was it legal? That was the great question. If it was, I thought I might bide my time, and look forward to its acknowledgment at some future day. But if not——

"The lawyer was cruelly frank. He told me the ceremony had been quite irregular, and was not binding upon either of us. My last hope was gone! And the dreadful part of it was that I didn't know whether my husband—my supposed husband—had tricked me, or whether he had really intended that the marriage should be legal. I paid the lawyer his fee, and went out into the streets with my ears singing and my head throbbing. I felt as though I were in some horrible dream. Then I went to my garret and threw myself in desperation on the floor. It's a wonder I didn't throw myself into the nearest pond. My rent was a fortnight in arrear, and I had only a few francs left.

"There I lay till evening. Then I roused myself a bit and tried to think. Bread I must have, and money to keep a roof over my head; that was all I could hope for now; for I had no husband, no married life to look forward to. It's lucky I was too wretched to be hungry, for I could scarcely have afforded supper had I wanted it. What should I do? I was young and strong, and in my circumstances I couldn't be particular. Then it occurred

to me that I might get something to do in the singing line, and I determined to try my luck at one of the *cafés chantants*. But meanwhile it was necessary I shouldn't starve, and I decided to go out and try to pawn my watch.

"Then happened the strange event which was to alter my whole career. On my way to the *mont-de-piété*, I had to pass one of the cheaper sort of hotels, and just as I came up a *fiacre* drove up to the door with luggage on it. By the merest chance I turned to look at the person inside. My heart gave a great bound, and I couldn't have suppressed the cry I uttered if my life had depended on it. It was my old schoolfellow, Naomi Insight—the English clergyman's daughter—just arrived from Frankfort on her way home!

"We rushed at each other, delighted to meet again. To see a friendly face was like heaven to me; and Naomi, on her side, seemed no less pleased. She insisted on my going in to have supper with her. 'I am so tired, Helen,' she said, 'and I cannot bear travelling alone. I've a dreadful headache, too; the journey has knocked me up completely. Come in and spend the evening with me.' So in we went, the hotel people no doubt fancying that we had both come by the train together. I told her then, for the first time, all my history; how I had been married, what I had found out since—everything, just as I have told you now—except about that wretched little sentimental

Jew boy who had tempted me. That I could *not* bring myself to speak of. Naomi cried for sympathy, offered me help, and promised she would see what she could do for me when she got to England. But she, on her part, was almost ignorant of what lay before her. She had only the dimmest recollection of her father, and he had very little notion of what she was like—in fact, they were little better than strangers to each other. She pressed me to stay with her that night, for she had a horror of being in a strange place all by herself, and was feeling unwell besides, complaining of headache and sore-throat.

"Of course I stayed. I remember she slept badly, and the next morning she was very ill. I got frightened, and sent out for a doctor. It was nearly twelve before he came, and by that time she was delirious. He looked at her, took her temperature, and promised he would come again in the afternoon. Then it was he said she had got typhoid fever. I don't know how to describe the days that followed. I stayed with her and nursed her, but I don't think she ever rightly recovered her senses afterwards. It's a satisfaction to me to think that the doctor praised my nursing, and told me I mustn't wear myself out. He looked at me one day, and asked me if I was delicate. I said, not that I knew of, particularly. Then he shook his head, and said I must be careful of myself. I didn't know what he meant then, but I do now.

"In a few days Naomi died. It was at eleven o'clock in the evening; the doctor had gone away a couple of hours before, saying he feared he could do no more. The whole of that awful night I was alone with her dead body.

"That was the night of my temptation. I paced up and down the room, thinking and wrestling with myself. Thoughts came into my head that had never entered it till then. On one hand, the old, hard struggle against starvation, and even guilt—loneliness, misery, and perhaps the river as a last resource; on the other, a father, a home—comfort, at any rate, and safety. Dared I risk it? Naomi's father had to all intents and purposes never seen her. We were not in the least alike, it is true, except that we were both slight, and had dark hair, and were about the same age. And then I thought an English clergyman must be rather a grand person, with a rectory or a vicarage, much looked up to, and all that. Living in Frankfort all my life, I knew no better. Finally, I decided to risk it.

"I suppose you know nearly all the rest. Mr. Insight received me without the slightest suspicion, and believed all I told him about the illness and death of Helen Jarvis, the girl who had been expelled, and whom I had rescued from destitution in the streets of Brussels. I was disappointed to find he was not a rector with a handsome

living, but only a Dissenting minister in poor circumstances; yet at first the change was pleasant to me, and the relief from all anxiety was like the rest of heaven.

"This went on for two or three weeks; then came an awful blow. I was out one day, walking on the Westhampton Road, when I suddenly met the Jew boy. How it was I didn't faint then and there I can't tell. He spoke to me with his usual innocent smile, not appearing in the least surprised to see me, but simply saying how delightful it was that we had met again. I could have killed him from sheer terror, partly lest he should betray me, partly because he exercised a sort of subtle attraction over me which I might not always be able to resist. There was no help for it. He had me in his power, and I had to make my own terms. I told him everything. How could I help it? He might have ruined me with a word, and turned me on the streets again. And lest he should do this, I had to temporise with him; while he, all sweetness and amiability, laughed my fears to scorn, and said he desired nothing more than to renew our old acquaintance.

"But he renewed more than that. He renewed his love-making, and more than once waylaid me as I was coming home through the fields of an evening. He would talk to me of Haidée and Don Juan on the island, and ask me whether such a life of solitude and sweetness could

have no charms for me. It was a hard and bitter struggle. My life at Mr. Insight's was dull enough to make me long for something brighter, but still it was a life of safety and repose—if only I could temporise with my tormentor. Then came another chance. You asked me to marry you, Mr. Tresham. Oh, what a chance was that! Not that I loved you quite as well as you loved me; but the prospect was a fair one, nevertheless. I had only one to reckon with—the evil genius of my life—Giraldi.

"I defied him. He came to me, laughing and smiling in the way I used to think so winsome at one time, and congratulated me. But I could see a glitter in his eyes that seemed to have a menace in it. Then he drew off altogether, and for a day or two I did not see him again. I had almost began to breathe freely, when I got a letter from Fräulein Plänckner. I opened it trembling, for I had learned to dread any continuance or revival of my old connections in Frankfort. She wrote to tell her 'dear Naomi' that she hoped to come to England in a few weeks, when she would make a point of visiting my father. She went on to praise me for having befriended that wicked and abandoned girl Jarvis during her illness, and told me she had heard a rumour that her—that is, my—husband, who of course was not her husband at all, was on the point of being married to a lady in St. Petersburg. Can you

wonder that when you came in that morning I was in a half-hysterical state—that I urged you to marry me without delay? You talked about six months, when the delay of a week might have brought ruin to me! It drove me nearly frantic, but there was no help.

"I'm getting very weak, Mr. Tresham," resumed Helen Jarvis, after a slight pause. "But confession's good for the soul, and I must make an end of it. There's not much to tell now. It's about the day I disappeared. Eric Charteris had asked me to go with him for a walk before he went up to London. He fancied he cared for me a little, poor fellow; but of course that was all nonsense. I met him, and we did walk for about an hour and a half. Then he left me, and I prepared to return home. But just as I was passing that corner—you know it—where this road turns into High Street, I caught sight of Giraldi coming towards me from the direction of this place.

"I was not able to avoid him, and he pressed me to walk a little way back with him towards St. Gertrude's. It was getting dark, and I was anxious to get home, but he would take no denial. He looked at me with that tempting, irresistible, boyish smile of his; he clutched my hand as we walked side by side along the lonely road; he laughed softly at the idea of my ever marrying you. I can't tell, at this moment, wherein lay the strength of his

influence over me; but it was partly fright and partly fascination. 'Come,' he said, playfully, 'don't let us keep up that joke any longer. You'd sooner I loved you than hated you, surely? It's a pity I can't marry you myself; but I'm a Roman Catholic, you know, and I should lose half my fortune if I married a heretic. But you mustn't marry Tresham! I forbid the banns—I'll tell him everything, I swear I will, unless you give him up!' Then, in the extremity of my despair, an idea flashed on me. Vicious as he was, I knew him to be steeped in superstition, and as quick as thought I turned upon him, and threatened that if he did or said a single thing to hinder my marriage I would go straight to the priest and expose all his wickedness. I told him his sentimental mixture of religion and vice was horrible, and I dared him to say a word against me. He turned quite white, and seized me by the arm. 'You daren't, you daren't!' he cried. 'I'll kill you first.' Then he shook me violently, and there was an awful struggle between us. We had got some yards past the Oratory by that time, and the road was dark and lonely. A dreadful panic took possession of me; my head began to swim; I felt a sharp pain at my heart which made me shriek out, and then I fainted.

"When I came to, I found myself lying here. They said I had broken a blood-vessel. I discovered afterwards

that Giraldi had rushed for assistance to the Refuge, telling the Lady Superior that he had found a dying woman in the road, apparently on her way from Westhampton to Heathercombe. I was brought in here, no one recognising me. Of course I knew that my absence would cause alarm, but the news that anybody was missing never reached this place, I believe—they live so isolated and cut off from the rest of the world. A sort of medical priest came in to see me. He examined me very carefully, I being in a semi-conscious state, and I heard him whisper to the Superior that I had something serious the matter with my heart, which might end fatally any moment. Oh, how thankful I was! Death—the remedy for all my troubles—death would come to me in this quiet place, and put an end to everything. I longed for death; it made me happy to think that I was dying. I thought of you, Mr. Tresham—Arthur—and of poor Mr. Insight; but it seemed to me it would only give you needless pain to see me, and I shrank, oh! how I shrank from seeing you, and telling you my woeful history; though at times I thought I ought to, especially when the Sisters questioned me; until at last they told me the end was not far off, and then I summoned up my courage, and asked them to send for Dr. Urquhart, and then for you—to make you my confession, and ask you to forgive me before I die."

CHAPTER XXVII.

TRUE OR FALSE?

THE ticking of the little clock upon the mantelpiece and the fall of a bit of coal from the fire were the only sounds which for some seconds broke the silence when Helen Jarvis had finished speaking. Tresham, dazed and shocked beyond expression, continued to sit, his head resting on his hand, by the side of the girl's bed; while Helen herself lay back exhausted upon her pillows, breathing with painful effort. At last Dr. Urquhart rose, and broke the spell.

"I'm afraid you have over-exerted yourself," he said in a low voice, bending over her, and taking her hand in his. "You must try and see if you can't sleep for a few hours. We'd better go now, Tresham," he added very gently, laying his hand on the shoulder of the young man.

"Yes," assented Tresham, absently, as he roused himself. "I can't take all this in yet; I must have time to try and realise it. The whole thing is like a nightmare." Then he turned to the wan figure in the bed. "Naomi!"

he uttered. "You'll always be Naomi to me. I must go now. May I come and see you again to-morrow?"

"Please do," said Helen, in a faint whisper.

Just then the door opened, and a Sister entered bearing a little lamp. Dr. Urquhart gave her a few directions, and then joined Tresham, who had already left the room. The young man looked very white, and his hand shook painfully.

"Now, let me drive you home," said Dr. Urquhart, buttoning his glove.

"Not yet," said Tresham, with a start. "I've something to do first, and I want you to come with me. I've got to see Giraldi!"

"Be advised by me," said Urquhart. "Put it off. Don't do anything hastily; you might have reason to regret it."

"Not a drop of water or a crumb of bread passes my lips until I've had it out with that young miscreant," replied Tresham, inflexibly. "There's no use in arguing, Urquhart; so come with me at once. And then I shall have something to say to the Superior."

Urquhart, seeing that Tresham was inexorable, yielded; and the two went with rapid footsteps in the direction of Giraldi's rooms. By this time it was about seven o'clock. Vespers were just over; the last strains of the organ came fitfully from the chapel on the other side of the quadrangle,

and at last ceased altogether, while the inmates of the Oratory hurried to their various quarters to prepare for their evening meal. It took some minutes to walk from the Sisters' house to that wing of the building occupied by Giraldi, and by the time they arrived in front of his door it was close on the dinner-hour. Tresham knocked sharply.

"Come in!" cried Giraldi from inside.

They entered. Giraldi had just washed his hands and otherwise prepared for dinner, and was now on the point of going out. He started violently when he saw who his visitors were, but recovered himself sufficiently to put on his usual smiling expression, and greet them civilly, if not warmly.

"You know best if you ought to be glad to see us," said Tresham, in a stern and menacing tone, as he closed the door behind him. "No, Sir; I shall not shake hands with you. I do not come here as your friend."

"Perhaps you'll explain what you mean," replied Giraldi, his breath coming short and quick.

"That is my intention," answered Tresham. "We have this moment come from—from Miss Jarvis;" the name cost him a struggle, but he got it out; "and we now know her history, and the part you played in it. We know everything; we know you as a profligate, a liar, a systematic hypocrite—one who has ruined a girl's life, who is respon-

sible for her approaching death, who was privy to her disappearance, who has been the cause of all the wretchedness and anxiety we've been suffering for weeks past. Do you hear what I say, you little fiend?" he shouted in a gust of passion, "and will you dare to deny its truth?"

Giraldi had had time to recover himself. He now sat by the side of his table, and carelessly drew strokes and curves on a scrap of paper with a lead pencil, a faint smile hovering round his lips. Dr. Urquhart looked curiously at him, watching the play of his features with close interest. The lad was pale, and once or twice he tossed the curls off his forehead with his hand irritably; but he scarcely showed signs of that despairing shame which one would look for in a suddenly convicted criminal. At last he raised his eyes, and there seemed a gleam of humour in them.

"Can't you speak?" demanded Tresham.

"What do you want me to say?" replied Giraldi, glancing at him for a second from the corner of his eye.

"Confess—or deny, if you can—that you have long been acquainted with the girl who is now dying in the Refuge; that you led us all to believe you did not know her; that you were aware of her true name; that both here and in Frankfort you persecuted and tempted her—in one case playing on her fears, and in the other on her helplessness;

and that it was the torture you inflicted which led to the seizure she had the day she disappeared. Deny all this, I say, if you can; but if you can't, confess without more ado. It's the only reparation you can offer."

Giraldi toyed with his pencil, seemingly much interested in a profile sketch he was making on the back of an old letter, while Tresham stood threateningly before him. At last he said—

"I certainly knew well enough that Helen Jarvis was an impostor."

Tresham winced at the word, but restrained himself. "And you kept that knowledge to yourself?" he continued.

"I did," replied Giraldi, in a more decided tone. "I suppose you're annoyed with me for never telling you. Well, that was wrong, perhaps; but surely Helen Jarvis can't complain of it. If I allowed you to be deceived, at least I kept her secret."

"Did you never threaten to reveal it?" exclaimed Tresham.

"Threaten!" repeated Giraldi, with something almost like a laugh. "That is scarcely the word to use. It might have *become necessary* for me to say what I knew, and in that case I should have had no option. Don't you know that in such matters I am entirely in the hands of my confessor?"

"Your confessor!" echoed Tresham, astonished.

"To be sure," replied Giraldi. "If I believe I'm in possession of some important fact, whether of a guilty nature or not, the only thing to be done is to mention it to the priest, and be guided by him. Perhaps he tells me it's no business of mine, and I need say nothing about it; perhaps he orders me to divulge it at once to those whose interest it is to know. So you see that, as far as that is concerned, I have no responsibility whatever. As a matter of fact, I did keep Helen Jarvis's secret, though it's true enough I never promised I would do so always."

"Precisely!" exclaimed Tresham. "You kept it as long as you thought there was any chance of your retaining her in your clutches, and you threatened to divulge it directly you saw she was bent on marrying me. I don't care whether that's your morality or your priest's, but I shall take an early opportunity of telling him my opinion of it."

Giraldi's pencil slipped suddenly to one side, making an ugly mark which entirely spoiled the face. "I think not," he said, crumpling up the paper and tossing it behind him. "Priests do not discuss matters that have been communicated to them under the seal of confession, especially with heretics."

"I shall invite no discussion," replied Tresham. "I shall simply tell him my opinion of him. Heaven and

earth! You at confession—you getting absolution, reeking with sin as you are—it takes away my breath to think of it. What a system! And these men knowing it the whole time, being behind the scenes and conniving at such villainy! Come, Urquhart, let's be off. I'm going to see the Superior, and I want you as a witness."

"You shall not!" cried Giraldi, with a tremor in his shrill tones. He started up with pale face and sparkling eyes, and confronted the two men. "Father Aloysius is at dinner, and he would never permit you to approach any such subject. I am not responsible for what that girl has told you. If you choose to believe the slanders brought against me by an adventuress who's been masquerading under a false name for months past, who was going to marry you without knowing whether she was married already or not herself, and who was as well known in Frankfort——"

A soft, low tap at the door interrupted Giraldi's sudden flow of words. A hunted expression came into his eyes as he turned his head quickly in the direction of the sound; he drew in his breath sharply, and clutched the back of his chair. The tap was repeated, and then the door opened. It was Father Aloysius.

"Giraldi!" he said, with more eagerness than usual; then, becoming aware of the presence of strangers, he

hesitated and looked embarrassed. "Ah! Mr. Tresham," he added, as he recognised the young man. Tresham bowed, and stood prepared to speak. Then the Superior started, as though an idea had struck him; and Tresham, observing the change in his expression, awaited the issue of events.

"It is singular I should find you here, Mr. Tresham," resumed the Father, after a moment's pause. "I have just made a most strange discovery, and it is just possible you may be able to throw a little light upon it. It refers to that poor woman," he continued, turning to Giraldi, "whom you found dying, as we thought at the time, in the road about a month ago. Didn't you tell me, Giraldi, that she had come from Westhampton?"

"I don't think I said anything for certain," replied Giraldi in a choking voice.

"Well, however that may be," rejoined the Father, "I am now informed that she lives in Heathercombe, and that her friends have been in a state of deep distress about her ever since she disappeared. I am terribly perplexed and grieved. You see, Mr. Tresham, we live so isolated a life here, that many things occur in the town of which we know nothing; and when that poor creature was brought in here that night, I had no more idea she was connected with this place than Giraldi had. It is true I heard some-

thing a week or so ago about a lady being missed from the neighbourhood; but I was very deeply occupied at the time, and paid but little attention, I regret to say. Can you help me at all, Mr. Tresham?"

The young man stared at the speaker in blank bewilderment. Had not Giraldi already told him about Helen's imposture under the seal of confession? Had not the priest been privy to Giraldi's infamy, and ready to shield him by refusing to discuss the matter with a heretic? What could it all mean?

"I *can* help you, Sir," replied Tresham, drawing himself up. "And so can—your penitent," he added, pointing to Giraldi. "Perhaps it would be kinder to give him the chance of speaking first."

It was now the turn of the Superior to look amazed. "Giraldi?" he repeated, turning to the lad inquiringly. But Giraldi remained silent. "What is this mystery?" repeated the priest, more sternly. "Is it possible that you are mixed up in some intrigue?"

"I am quite willing that Mr. Tresham should give his own version of the affair," said the boy, looking up with a peculiar smile. "Only remember, Father, it is all hearsay—he knows nothing of himself. It's a scandalous fabrication, the very authorship of which is sufficient to condemn it."

"Allow me," interposed Tresham. "The facts, Sir, are simply these. A month ago, Mr. Insight, whom I believe you know slightly, was suddenly afflicted by the disappearance of his daughter Naomi—to whom I was myself engaged to be married. The shock of this sorrow resulted in a stroke of paralysis to her father, who had learned to love his daughter very dearly in spite of the fact that, when she joined him here last June, he had not seen her since she was an infant in arms. About my own sufferings I need say nothing. For a month all our searches were fruitless; but to-day my friend here, Dr. Urquhart, informed me, to my intense astonishment, that the missing girl had been, and still was, under your roof. I came here instantly, and have only just concluded the most painful interview it has ever been my lot to undergo. During that interview she told me all her history. Naomi Insight died in Brussels more than four months ago; and she—whom we all believed to be Miss Insight—is a poor friendless girl named Helen Jarvis, who from poverty and persecution yielded to the temptation to personate her dead school-fellow. This was known to Giraldi, and to him only. He had persecuted her in Frankfort, but happily without success; and he persecuted her here, pursuing her with his infamous importunities and threatening her with the disclosure of her secret if she put herself beyond his power by marrying me.

Did you believe his story of the wayfaring woman he had found dying by the roadside? It was his cruel threats that brought on the heart-attack to which Helen Jarvis succumbed the night you found her; it is at his door that the guilt will lie if she dies."

"It is false!" cried Giraldi, excited now for the first time. Father Aloysius, the picture of perplexity and horror, turned towards him almost appealingly. "I've already acknowledged I was wrong to let Mr. Tresham's engagement go on when I knew of it. But I was so placed that whatever I did I was bound to injure one of them. If I'd allowed him to marry Helen Jarvis, I should have done him wrong, for she was an impostor; and I couldn't prevent her from marrying him except by warning her that I mightn't always be able to keep her secret. Now the secret's out—she told it to him herself this very evening, quite independently of me. What is my crime, then? You have made some insinuations"—turning to Tresham —"reflecting upon my character. You've called me a fiend and a liar and a hypocrite. Let Father Aloysius judge beween us! He is my confessor, and I am answerable to him alone."

"I think, Sir," interposed Dr. Urquhart gravely, "that it is time this scene should end. I was a witness at the interview between my friend Mr. Tresham and Miss Jarvis,

and can fully confirm his account of the accusations brought by her against Giraldi. Of the probable truth of such charges you would no doubt be the best judge. Permit me to suggest that you make such inquiries of Miss Jarvis herself as you may consider necessary."

"She would simply repeat what you have heard already," interposed Giraldi, before the Superior could reply. "Oh, Dr. Urquhart, why are you so blind? How is it you can't see the truth? I have hidden it as long as I can; but now you've pressed me so, it must come out. She accuses me of having persecuted her and tempted her. It's a lie! *I was the tempted; she the temptress.* Go to Frankfort and make your inquiries there, if you don't believe me. Her goings-on were notorious. She got one wretched fellow actually to marry her, though luckily for him the ceremony turned out illegal, and then, when he avoided her and tried to shake her off, she did all she could to fix herself on me. It's easy to talk about men betraying women; did you never hear of women ruining men? I tell you she hunted me down, and did everything in her power to compromise us both. Why, she was more than a year older than I; I had had no experience of women, and as she knew I was young and rich, I suppose she thought I was fair game. At last she was expelled from the school, and went to Brussels, where she lived somehow for three or four months. I'd

been here nearly that time when I suddenly met her, and then she made a full confession of her imposture. I hadn't it in my heart to betray her until I heard that she was going to be married; but Tresham was my friend, and I thought that that was pushing it too far. It was when I was reasoning with her about this that she was taken ill, and there was nothing for it but to bring her into the infirmary, which was close by. That is the beginning and the end of my connection with this wretched girl, and it's cruel—cruel," cried the lad, dashing away a bright tear, as his voice trembled with indignation, "that I should be libelled and defamed so shamefully."

"I must inquire into this painful matter more closely," said the Superior, after a long pause. "As Giraldi's guardian and confessor, I have a double interest in eliciting the truth. The whole affair is inexpressibly shocking to me, and I can only assure you, gentlemen,"—turning to Tresham and Urquhart,—"that no pains shall be lacking on my part to sift these conflicting statements. Giraldi, come into my room at nine o'clock this evening."

"I am deeply indebted to you for your kindness in this affair, Father Aloysius," said Tresham, as he prepared to leave; "but there is one question which puzzles me greatly, and I cannot help asking you about it. How is it possible that Helen Jarvis can have been in your infirmary for a

month, and remained unknown to you? Did you make no attempt to find out who she was? And is it possible you never heard that a young lady answering to her description was missing from her home in Heathercombe?"

"In the first place," replied the Superior, "we make it a rule to ask no questions whatever of any applicant for admission to our Refuge. The only qualification we require is need and sickness; and this lady, on being examined by the head-nurse and our own physician, was pronounced seriously ill. Moreover, she begged that no measures might be taken calculated to lead to her discovery, saying simply that she was far from home and friendless, and asked for nothing but a quiet place to die in. She gave her name, however, correctly—Helen Jarvis, which was quite unknown to me. How should I connect her with Mr. Insight? I think I have already told you I did not know that any one was missing from the neighbouring town until quite recently; but my attention was much taken up at the moment with important matters connected with our Order, and I did not associate the two events. Our system, as you know, is one of isolation both for ourselves and our inmates, and hitherto it has worked well. I am, however, free to confess that this terrible occurrence has made me doubt whether in certain cases more elasticity might not be desirable."

"But the nurse—the Sister who came from this place to

nurse Mr. Insight!" cried Tresham. "How is it the truth did not come out through her?"

"I must remind you, Mr. Tresham," rejoined Father Aloysius, "that by the rules of our Order no mention is ever made outside of what occurs within. Had Sister Philomène learnt the cause of her patient's illness, the coincidence would no doubt have struck her, and she would at once have communicated with me; but no information of the sort was given her; and even if the fact had been mentioned in her hearing—a matter of which I know nothing either way—she would have been none the wiser, as she scarcely understands one word of English. The truth is, that on this particular point we have all been the victims of circumstances, and while I deplore the unhappy result, I cannot feel that I personally have laid myself open to your censure."

Tresham hastened to assure the Superior that nothing was further from his thought, and commending Helen to his kindness, parted from him with mutual assurances of good-will. Dr. Urquhart, of course, accompanied him, and Father Aloysius, gravely courteous as ever, escorted them to the garden-gate. Giraldi made no attempt at taking leave of them. He waited until they were out of sight, and then moved rapidly and noiselessly along the corridors which led to the room occupied by Helen Jarvis.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MR. INSIGHT HAPPY AT LAST.

To Tresham's grief at the ruin of his life's hopes through the approaching death of Helen, and the shock he had sustained from the dreadful character of her disclosure, was now added the keener torment of misgivings. He had been deeply pained by much that she had herself confessed. There was no longer any room for doubt that she had led a reckless and in some measure unprincipled life; that she had been about to marry him for safety, and not for love; that at the very time she believed herself to be a wife, she had entered into compromising intimacy with the first good-looking youth who laid siege to her affections; and that she had been living for months under a false name. This was all true—true by her own confession; yet so weighty were the extenuating circumstances, and so firm had she been in her resistance to the tempter, that at the conclusion of her story, crushed and mortified as he was, Tresham had cried within his heart that there was nothing in it he could not bring himself to forgive—nothing to

render even his marriage with her a scandal or a crime, were she, by a miracle, to recover. But now a sharper sting had been inflicted on him. Her story was condemned as false in all that softened or excused her conduct. Bitterly vindictive as he felt towards Giraldi, it was impossible to shut out the conviction that his account, and not Helen's, might be the true one. He had said that she was notorious in Frankfort, that she had inveigled her supposed husband into marrying her, and that in her relations with Giraldi it was she who had been the temptress and he the destined victim. *This might be true.* Giraldi, after all, was a gentleman, and had always given evidence of a deeply religious character; Helen was a girl of low birth, and by her own confession an adventuress and impostor. She, again, was in distressed circumstances, whereas Giraldi was wealthy, and therefore a prize worth winning. Could she have tried to cajole or frighten him into marrying her? Was she carrying a false face to the very grave with her, and had he, Tresham, been guilty of a grievous wrong towards Giraldi?

The solution of the problem, however, now lay with Father Aloysius, and both Tresham and Urquhart felt full confidence in the justice of his ultimate decision. A far greater and more practical difficulty meanwhile presented itself before them. Should they, or should they not, tell

Mr. Insight the shocking secret they had learnt? Urquhart thought not, as the revulsion of feeling might have a prejudicial effect upon his patient's health, and could be productive of no good. Tresham, on the other hand, said yes, supporting his contention by general principles, and arguing that unforeseen troubles of the gravest possible nature might arise from a suppression of the truth. The two men debated the matter long and earnestly, and eventually arrived at a compromise. Dr. Urquhart undertook to tell the minister simply that the missing girl had been discovered, but that her death was a question of days; leaving further disclosures to the mercy of necessity or chance, and saying not one word more than was needful to pacify the old man's mind.

The next morning at ten o'clock he was by Mr. Insight's bedside. The suppressed excitement in his keen dark eye was not lost upon the quick-witted old minister, and this helped the doctor over his first difficulty. "What is it, doctor?" asked the patient, with a shrewd glance at Dr. Urquhart's face. "You look as though you had news—what is it?" And then he was told—quietly and carefully, but with no irritating appearance of reluctance or reservation—what Urquhart and Tresham had decided he should know at first. The immediate effect seemed favourable. It was as though the relief occasioned by the removal of

the great weight more than compensated for the poignant sorrow caused by the news of Helen's fatal illness, and old Insight fell back upon his pillow with a "God be praised for all His goodness to us!" which at once set Urquhart's mind at rest as to the effect of his communication. Then, of course, the reaction came. The old man began to realise the fact that his daughter's days were numbered, and nothing would satisfy him but a promise from the doctor that he should be taken to see her that afternoon. The risk from agitation of mind was greater than that from exposure to the air; but a refusal would have been attended with even greater peril, and Dr. Urquhart gave in.

It occurred to both Urquhart and Tresham afterwards that the policy they had adopted was a bad one. It would have been better, they sorrowfully agreed, if they had told the minister point-blank that his daughter had lain some months already in the cemetery at Brussels. But they had shrunk from this; and the sequel proved how sadly mistaken had been their course.

In the meantime, Tresham debated within himself whether he should pay his promised visit to the Refuge before hearing from Father Aloysius. He had little doubt that the Superior would extract the truth from Giraldi, and felt sure that Helen's version of their relations would meet with the fullest consideration from so candid and upright

a man. Then there was the difficulty of meeting Helen and conversing with her before this terrible uncertainty had been cleared up; and yet, how he longed to go! Eventually, however, he decided to put a restraint upon his inclinations, and contented himself with dispatching a short but affectionately worded note, in which he promised to come and see her later in the day. With this he sent a letter to Father Aloysius, expressing his earnest longing that the suspense he was in respecting the subject of their conversation on the previous afternoon should be put an end to as soon as possible. The Father, in reply, assured him that he was at that very time engaged in conversation with Miss Jarvis, and that he would write definitely to him with regard to the matter in hand during the afternoon. Just at this juncture Dr. Urquhart looked in, and told Tresham the result of his conversation with the old minister. He had arranged to drive him over to the Refuge at three o'clock, and a message had been accordingly sent on to the Lady Superior to that effect, in order that Helen might prepare herself for the interview. Tresham, much relieved, drew a deep breath of satisfaction. The projected visit of Mr. Insight would render it unnecessary, if not inconvenient, for him to go at the same time. Helen would scarcely expect him, and would therefore not be disappointed; while he, meanwhile, would receive the much-

desired communication from Father Aloysius, embodying the results of his inquiries. So far everything had happened as he could have wished. But what of the future? How was this shocking affair to be kept from becoming the property of all the gossip-mongers of Heathercombe? Helen was dying; could he allow her to be buried under a false name? Could he allow the true Naomi Insight to continue with a false inscription over her grave in Brussels? It seemed impossible, whether she lived or died, to prevent the terrible and disgraceful truth from leaking out; and he, her once affianced husband, must be privy to the publication of her dishonour. The position, it will be conceded, was a painful one; but then it was no more, after all, than the natural consequence of a long and deliberate course of deception, and deception is a thing which carries within it the seeds of bitter fruit. There was one source of alleviation, however, in store for Tresham, of the indications of which he was as yet not fully conscious. The first bloom had been brushed from off his passion. The overpowering love of which he had been the subject had very gradually, almost unconsciously, been cooling. He still suffered, and Giraldi's statement had made him suffer acutely—so acutely, indeed, that he felt astonished at his own exceeding sensibility; but the very fact that such a discovery occasioned surprise, or was a discovery at

all, was in reality fraught with significance. The violence of his love was burning itself out, and giving place to an intense and pitying tenderness towards its former object, wholly distinct from passion. Tresham was as an animal that had been shorn and was to be shorn still closer, and the wind was being tempered to him. But this, as we have seen, had not yet fully dawned upon his mind.

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"My child! O Naomi! my child, my child!"

The cry came, inexpressibly pathetic, from the lips of the old man, as his eyes fell on the form of the dying girl. She, agitated and aghast, shrank, with a faint moan, from the gaze bent so yearningly upon her. "Forgive me, father!" she whispered, in a sort of gasp. "Forgive thee, my darling?" cried old Insight, his emotion choking his utterance, as the hot tears fell thick and fast over her wasted hand. The strain was too great, and for some minutes he was unable to utter another word. She, meanwhile, lay sorely perplexed and overawed, her heart labouring painfully, while a deadly bluish tinge gradually diffused itself over her drawn face.

"Why did you leave me, dear one?" murmured the old man at last.

"Oh, don't you know?" said Helen, faintly.

"I know nothing!" he cried, pitifully. "There, never

mind—I don't want to know. God has restored you to me—let that suffice. And if He sees fit to take you from me altogether," added he, manfully struggling against his sobs, "I will still thank Him for having in His great mercy permitted me to see your dear face once more on earth."

"Don't—don't!" gasped Helen, with an agonised appeal in her eyes.

"I will—at least I'll try to," said old Insight, with a touch of heroism. He felt as though his heart-strings were breaking, but he still held up his head. "Naomi, my daughter—my only child! We have not been long together, darling, have we? But there's a good time coming, my precious—we've all eternity before us. Ah! how happy we shall be there—there, on the other side! No more partings there, my dear; no more running away," he continued, with an attempt at playfulness unutterably pathetic, as the tears poured down his face.

"How sweet you are!" murmured Helen, almost inaudibly. "But oh! if you only knew how little I deserve it! Heaven? How can I hope for heaven! Father—let me call you so once more—there is something I *must* tell you before I die."

"Tell me what you like, dear," said old Insight, fondling her hand in his. "God has given me back my daughter,

and I can stand anything—anything, while I have you with me. What is it, Naomi, my dear?"

"How *can* I tell him?" uttered Helen, under her breath. "Yet I must—I dare not die with a falsehood on my lips."

"Wait till you feel stronger, dear," said the old minister, soothingly. "There's no hurry." He had not caught her last words, and was only anxious to spare her strength. "And we shall have plenty of time—over there," he added, with a far-away smile in his eyes. The anxious look on Helen's face gradually gave place to a calmer expression, and a faint reflection of the old man's peaceful gaze lent an almost spiritual beauty to her worn features. For some minutes silence reigned in the little room, and a solemn hush fell upon the two.

"How strange, how sweet it is!" murmured the old minister at last. "We've both of us a dark journey before us, dear, but it is a very short one. I think the summons will come for you first, my child; but it won't be long before I get mine. You may expect me to join you very soon, dear; and then—oh, then——"

Suddenly a sharp spasm, pitiless and agonising to behold, passed over the face of Helen, as she turned her head abruptly towards the door. Mr. Insight, terrified, started up; and, looking in the same direction, caught a momentary glimpse of some one in the act of retiring.

"Who's there?" he cried, tremulously. He had seen a boy's face, with dark, curly hair, and an anxious, lowering expression. Then he turned again in an agony of apprehension to Helen, and leant over her. The spasm had passed away, and she lay back white and panting on the pillow, an expression of the direst distress and helplessness in her eyes. "I'm going!" she gasped. "I must—tell you—now." But her breath failed her. "Nearer!" she whispered hoarsely, after a brief struggle. "*I'm not*—I'm——"

The voice ceased. And when they came in an hour afterwards, they found the old minister lying in his chair as helpless and unconscious as the dead girl. The first stroke had dealt gently with him; the second dealt still gentlier, for it was the summons to which he had looked forward. And thus it happened that the interruption of their discourse did not last for long.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHAT WAS GIRALDI?

I HAVE heard it said that, however irregular a person's lineaments may be, any change in them, with a view to modifying or improving their effect, would infallibly be for the worse. For instance, a man may be palpably disfigured by too short a nose, too long an upper lip, or too receding a chin. But to provide his face, as it exists, with a more harmonious feature instead of the one which so offends our eye, would, we are told, be a very great mistake. The mere substitution of a good nose for a bad one would prove a failure; the new organ would not fit easily into its surroundings; we must remodel the entire countenance, or else leave it as it was originally. Now whether this is true or not—and I, for one, have serious doubts about it—the fact remains that there are many persons in the world who might be regarded as almost handsome were it not that the general harmony of their features is upset by some incongruous and discordant element; and as physical phenomena are often found to

possess their correlatives in the immaterial sphere, we need not be surprised if the same want of proportion confronts us in the moral world. This, it may be replied, simply amounts to saying, what everybody knows, that men and women are inconsistent creatures. That is true; but how many casual observers are there who realise the marvellous and almost incredible extent to which inconsistency is often carried?—how nearly impossible it is in many cases to predict, or even imagine, with any certitude the course of action a man will adopt in a given case by merely arguing from his public utterances, or even his known convictions? My experience of life teaches me that the real knowledge of our fellows is next to unattainable. Their exterior character, if I may so speak, is obvious and clear enough; but underneath the surface there is some strange anomaly, some unsuspected lacuna, or flaw, or twist, which we may never discover of ourselves, but which may suddenly display itself to our blank astonishment or horrified amaze. Sometimes, on the other hand, the inconsistency is glaringly apparent. There are people in the world who seem to be compounded of two distinct individualities. Who has not read of men, rich in purse and standing deservedly high in the world's esteem, who were yet incorrigible kleptomaniacs? Or of cruel and remorseless monsters, in whom vindictiveness and malevolence were

a second nature, who lavished a world of tenderness on birds, or cats, or white mice? I myself have known men who were in the habit of going straight from church to a place which may be euphemistically described as the exact antipodes of a sanctuary. I even recall an instance in which one earnest man, an ex-minister, after a stirring speech at a Temperance meeting, he being a strong advocate of the Teetotal cause, walked straight home, got extremely drunk, and beat his wife severely. I could mention still stranger and more shocking cases; but it is unnecessary, for some such can scarcely fail to occur to every reader of these lines. I have said enough, I think, to establish my contention. The character of Margrave in Lytton's 'Strange Story' does not stand alone in life or fiction. There are many men who, like the minister in Hawthorne's romance, wear impenetrable veils before the world.

It is from a due consideration, then, of this law of incongruity that we shall obtain a key to the enigma of Giraldi's life. His external character was almost transparent in its simplicity. He was distinguished by two main passions—a love for his religion and a love for art. Catholicism was to him an embodiment of all that was true, and poetical, and sublime. The idea of the Church, as of a loving, beautiful, and mysterious Mother, appealed to his imagina-

tive and sentimental nature as powerfully as the incense and the music and the lights affected his æsthetic instincts. Protestants he regarded as purblind wanderers, outcasts from the one and only fold, differing almost inappreciably from those whom Protestants in their turn shudder at as freethinkers and atheists. He would have reproached himself with incipient heresy had he ever been betrayed into questioning, however timidly, the infallibility of the lightest word let fall by his confessor. His love for art was genuine and vivid, though here again his unreasoning devotion to the Church coloured and saturated his sensuous impulses. But at this point there occurred a curious hiatus. Of moral consciousness he was as devoid as Adam before the Fall. The abstract notions of honour, purity, and unselfishness had no meaning for him; he was, in the truest sense of the word, a moral imbecile, and as incapable of appreciating moral truths as a new-born baby or a young colt. During his stay at Frankfort it fell out that he encountered Helen Jarvis. Something in her appealed to his lower instincts, and he forthwith abandoned himself to their promptings as naturally and unresistingly as a bird at pairing-time. There was no sense of sin, no voice of conscience, to admonish or restrain him; and, flushed with a new and intoxicating desire, he pursued her with the eagerness and spontaneity of Apollo in his chase of

Daphne. The first occasion on which his tranquillity had received a shock was in the chapel at St. Gertrude's, when he overheard Tresham and Father Aloysius discussing the sacrament of confession. Then it was that a new, strange suspicion flashed across his mind—could it be possible that there was any connection between the tenor of his thoughts towards Helen Jarvis and *religion?* The sensation was exceedingly unpleasant; it had burst upon him suddenly, and the shock of it turned him sick. And the first idea that occurred to him afterwards was, what an odious and terrifying thing confession would be thenceforth—confession, which up till then had been so easy! But the impression had passed away; the oftener he saw Helen, the fainter it became and the more violent grew his passion; so that by the time he met her on that fateful evening when she fainted in the road, his religious feelings had sunk again to the very lowest ebb of pure æstheticism. There was absolutely nothing incongruous or inconsistent, in his view, in the association of his illicit love for Helen with his enjoyment of high mass. As long as Helen's charms did not wean him from his devotion to the Blessed Virgin, how was he the worse? Did the pursuit of a powerful and perfectly natural affection render him a less loyal son than heretofore of Holy Church? And was he not fully justified, by every consideration of expediency,

in imparting such a colour to his version of the story as should inflict the least injury where injury would be most felt? Of course, no reasoning such as this passed through his mind in a connected chain. He was, in fact, incapable of such a process; to appeal to his moral instincts was to invoke a tribunal which did not exist; much less, therefore, could he initiate so purely ethical a train of thought himself. When he found himself suddenly confronted by Tresham after Helen Jarvis had made a full confession of her antecedents, he felt for the moment nonplussed. But his native sharpness soon came to his assistance; remorse there was, and could be, none; and it was clear to him that the only course open to him was to make as good a case for himself as possible. He was, in fact, driven to bay, and, carried away by the pressing exigencies of the moment, lied, fearlessly and deliberately, in the very face of his confessor. At that supreme juncture there was no hesitation—no terrible misgiving with respect to the influence of his conduct upon his relations with the Church. His one idea was to neutralise, if possible, the opposing attestation of Helen. But in this he failed; and the interview between him and his confessor, which he was unable to escape, revealed to him, as in a blinding flash of lightning, the gulf which yawned between him and his religious privileges. It would be too much to say that he under-

stood why this should and must exist, for the idea was beyond his grasp; but he was soon made to understand that such was in fact the case, and that communion with the Church he loved so well was incompatible with the immorality of which he stood convicted.

Perhaps Tresham had never received a sadder or a humbler letter than that in which Father Aloysius confessed to him the infamy of his young pupil. For the Superior, cold and austere as he was, loved the lad, and none the less because of Giraldi's frank, pure, innocence of outward conduct, and enthusiastic devotion to the Church; he had been proud of his pupil, and looked forward to the day when Giraldi's influence and Giraldi's wealth should contribute their quota to the spread of the true religion. It was a bitter blow for Father Aloysius; but he bore it manfully, and carried himself like the Christian gentleman he was. This is what he wrote:—

"St. Gertrude's Oratory.

"Dear Sir,—It behoves me to inform you that my investigation of the terrible affair which has lately been disclosed has resulted in the full corroboration of Miss Jarvis's story. The mere fact, indeed, that Miss Jarvis fled from Frankfort to Brussels when, according to Giraldi, she was straining every nerve to secure the advantage of his protection, is sufficient to convict my unhappy pupil of a baseness and

a perfidy which I will not trust myself to speak of further. I may tell you, however, that he leaves this place to-morrow, and that he will never, while I am here, return. My personal humiliation is too deep for words.—Your most faithful servant,

✠ Aloysius, S.J."

It so fell out that this letter reached Tresham just as Helen herself was in the act of breathing her last; and thus he never learnt whether she had made known the secret of her life to Mr. Insight. It was not until both had lain in the grave some weeks that his thoughts reverted, with somewhat less bitterness, to the bright lad towards whom he had once felt so warmly, but whose character now stood out before him in so strange and repulsive a light. Was Giraldi, he often wondered, who possessed so fine a genius for religion, a morally responsible being? Could it be that this unnatural twist in his constitution was a taint transmitted to him from some remote Pagan ancestor? Is character a simple question of hereditary or physical organisation? Does virtue depend upon a harmonious correspondence between nerves and blood-vessels, or the disposition of molecules in the brain, while vice is no more than the inevitable concomitant of an abnormally hurried circulation? How otherwise was the monstrosity of Giraldi's temperament to be explained? We, too, may echo the

inquiry as to how this thing could be. But that such *lusus naturæ*, such instances of moral imbecility, do exist is surely beyond dispute. Just as an otherwise healthy child is born with a defective limb—just as a man may be mad on one subject though sane on every other—so are there persons in the world in whose moral mechanism there is some particular and specific flaw. Perhaps the day may come when phenomena of this description shall be made the subject of scientific investigation, and treated from the standpoint of pathology. It is a matter, not for the magistrate or the priest, but for the etiologist and physician.

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

Two years have passed since the closing of the drama that we have followed in the preceding chapters; two peaceful years, bright with the promise of happier times for most of our friends, and not altogether uneventful in the case of one or two. Heathercombe stands where it did, and looks very much the same as ever,—clean, cheerful, and picturesque. The scene is virtually unchanged; but the position of some of the actors has been shifted, and before we drop the curtain we must pay them one visit of farewell.

The Duke of Grandchester has again retired to the ambassadoric mansion in Park Lane, never, it is said, to reappear in Westlandshire. His Grace is now no more than a memory in Heathercombe, and Heathercombe is no more than a memory to his Grace. But the Duke and Duchess of Moneysworth still flourish, bearing the weight of their years and honours with perfect equanimity and good-humour, and never relaxing their efforts for the welfare of the town they live in.

Edith Charteris has for some weeks been the happy wife of Dr. Urquhart. It was a grand day for the old Duchess when "little Madam Edith" finally left the gloomy old house, fraught with so many painful associations, and took up her abode, for the last few months of her maidenhood, at The Hyacinths. And the old lady had probably never experienced keener delight than when, at breakfast on the wedding-day, a mysterious packet arrived for Miss Charteris from Messrs. Lapis, Lazuli, & Co., the eminent jewellers of Bond Street, which, when opened, was found to contain a necklace and a pair of earrings of magnificent pearls and sapphires. I am afraid to think how many fibs the unprincipled old dowager told that morning; but she was a bad dissembler, and contradicted herself so hopelessly over and over again, that she was forced at last to confess that she did know something about the jewels—in fact, she wasn't sure, but she thought they had been sent for by her old man.

Dr. Urquhart is still a sceptic; Edith is a poor theologian, and has long since given up trying to argue with him. But he has a better opinion of Christianity than he used to have, and has once or twice been heard to say that, if his wife is a fair specimen of a Christian, a system which can boast so meritorious a follower must have some good points about it.

Eric is in Chicago. He likes the life, and has taken wonderfully to Americans. He is doing well, too, thanks to his own energy and the friendship of Mr. Mass; but Edith is not quite easy about him, for there have been frequent allusions in some of his recent letters to a certain Miss Valeria Q. Sludge, and young Mrs. Urquhart, with the pride of her new matronhood upon her, does not relish the idea of Valeria Q. as a possible sister-in-law. So she is very anxious that Eric should lose no time in making his fortune and coming home again.

Lady Sharp is in a private lunatic asylum. She is perfectly quiet, and probably a good deal happier than she was in her sane years. Her delusions then were many; now she has only one. She believes she is the betrothed wife of the angel Gabriel.

Bethabara still flourishes; but the Little Hill, deprived of both its pastor and its principal supporter, has collapsed, many of the members joining the Baptist flock. The Independent chapel has taken a new lease of life. The pulpit where once our old friend Mr. Insight puzzled his congregation with abstruse reveries is now occupied by the Rev. Samuel Tiddy, B.A., a smart young man of the new school, fresh from Cheshunt. Mr. Tiddy is popular in the Connection, and often wonders innocently to himself how in the world that queer old man his predecessor, of whom

he hears so much, contrived to preach sermons which his hearers couldn't understand; and then he congratulates himself upon the undoubted fact that he has hitherto steered clear of all such pitfalls, and that so close an intellectual sympathy exists between him and his congregation.

Giraldi is almost forgotten. Sir Jupiter Rampant, astonished beyond measure at finding the character of his young ward so entirely different from what he had supposed, sent him abroad again soon after his dismissal by Father Aloysius, and he is now said to be living at Rome, where he finds the association between morality and religious unction less stringently enforced than at St. Gertrude's. He is still a Roman Catholic; but his Catholicism is now tinctured with philosophic tendencies, and he is beginning to regard religion less as a divine revelation than as a form of idealised rationalism, clothed in a sensuous or æsthetic garb. He no longer reads the Lives of Saints, and his own life affords a sufficient explanation of the change in his literary tastes.

And Tresham? Well, Tresham looks somewhat older than when first we met him. He has lost much of that youthful freshness of both mind and manners that once distinguished him, and he has a graver air,—the air of a man who has lived and suffered. But he is not heart-broken. The experiences through which he has passed

have mellowed rather than embittered him; they have been to him alike a lesson, a revelation, and a warning, and he is probably a better and a stronger man to-day than he was two years ago. He is still incumbent of the district church, and he has lived down much of that antagonism and detraction which assailed him when he first came to Heathercombe. The Duchess continues his fast friend. In fact, she has for a long time had a little plan in her head about Mr. Tresham, and there are some who say —gossip-mongers all, no doubt—that her Grace does not intend to fail on this occasion. Perhaps she is reckoning without her host. But there is no doubt that for months she has been intriguing to bring Tresham into what she calls a proper state of mind with regard to Beatrice Heath, and there have been one or two rumours that a certain *rapprochement* has actually taken place between them. Some folks think the old Duchess is very much to blame in doing this; but she generally has a good reason for her most extravagant proceedings, and if she is really bent on Tresham proposing to her friend Miss Heath, it is safe to conclude that she knows more of Miss Heath's own sentiments than do her critics. Nothing authentic is known of the progress of her plot; but she is in such tremendous spirits, and drops such broad hints as to her fondness for carpeting the houses of newly-married couples—a predilec-

tion, she says, which she will soon have another chance of gratifying—that we must not regard the future of poor Tresham as fully assured against the risks of matrimony.

Mr. Insight lies in the quiet cemetery under a very simple gravestone which records his name and age. At a little distance, just in the shadow of the wall, there is another monument; and Tresham often comes and looks at it, and sees that the flowers in front of it are fresh and carefully tended. The fashion of the stone is this:—

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